

4 *“Everything Christianity/the Bible Represents Is Being Attacked on the Internet!”: The Internet and Technologies of Religious Engagement*

The Pentecostal churches, noticing the spell that internet technology can cast in modern religious practices, embedded themselves within the lifeworld of social media. Like secular organizations have done, churches too used internet technology to enhance church operations, expand their sphere of operations, promote their pastors' charisma, aestheticize faith practices, democratize access to religious rituals, reinscribe faith into our increasingly automated world, and also bring God and his agents closer to the people. Within the vast expanse of virtual land, they carved their distinctive spaces and filled them up with sacraments, prayers, liturgies, and theologies to serve a worldwide network of audiences. With the seeming boundlessness of the Internet, Pentecostalism astutely expanded its operations across time and space.¹ Churches livestream sermons, post clips of sermons, announce forthcoming programs, show off their corporate social responsibility activities, and share prayers, admonition, photos, and testimonies. From pastors' personal pages, they share pictures of themselves and their families and stories about themselves. With the operating sphere of faith now expanded, and spiritual revelation practices merging with the culture of the Internet, Pentecostalism is further entrenched as a global culture. Worldwide, people have also responded to the emerging techno-cultural reality by turning the Internet into a sacramental space where they show up for prayers, sermons, and connections to a worldwide religious community.²

In addition to religious solicitations to which Nigerians actively contribute, they also generally maintain an active online culture,

¹ Asamoah-Gyadu, “Anointing through the Screen”; Asamoah-Gyadu, “‘Get on the Internet!’ Says the LORD.”

² Campbell, “Spiritualising the Internet.”

effusively investing social networks with their invisible yet tangible labor of engaging discussions on social and political life in the country.³ With few or almost non-existent public venues for either leisure or deliberation in the country, social media became a viable space where people “interact to form opinions in relation to which public policy must be attuned,”⁴ thanks to the proliferation of mobile phones imported from China, the relative affordability of data, and the Nigerians in the diaspora who maintain an active engagement with their fellow Nigerians at home. Perhaps unanticipated from the new social developments was how the relative sense of freedom people cultivated from the virtual culture that allowed anonymized identities, contrarian attitudes, free and unregulated speech, and networking of interests, would be extended from frequent critiques of political life to the religious culture. As the new media technology made possible expressions of dissent along with the enunciation of other aspects of sociopolitical life, religious authority suffered some collateral damage carried over from antagonisms of social life expressed in the virtual sphere. Since the dispersed audience of social media performances is more intensely networked than those of earlier forms of media such as the television, it was only a matter of time until the partisanship online culture promotes would also touch their religious leaders and lead to contestation of their authority. This chapter explores such contest of power with Pentecostal leadership, the most visible personification of power identity.

The deliberative nature of social media is one of the major factors that has made social media participants, religious and non-religious, inveigh against faith and pastoral authority in their online engagement. Social media also made it easier to garner a congregation and accelerate ideas among people who gather to participate, partly because of its novelty. Like previous forms of modern technology, the new media upended traditions and traditional authorities by taking away the ability of the entrenched authority to set social agenda and sometimes leaving them barely enough room to moderate agenda. This makes the much-touted “new” in the “New Media” not necessarily a description of its relative nascence but means that the network of users is still

³ Tatarchevskiy, “The ‘Popular’ Culture of Internet Activism.”

⁴ Poster, “Cyberdemocracy.”

discovering the technology’s most creative and radical uses. Social life narrations are now incomplete without acknowledging how embedded technological devices are in our mundane life and easily transfer our political disgruntlement and social tensions into virtual spaces. With its hyper-individualistic nature, the Internet has achieved two things for contemporary Pentecostalism: (1) it took religion from the private convictions of an individual and further privatized it; what people upload as the tenets of their individual convictions through various fora are intensely subjective and yet (2) it compels promotion of the private self as a religious subject. As such, faith is not just a private affair between a person and God; it is now between a person, God, and their social media followers. We share our faith with the public by plugging the performances of our faith into the endless currents of the activities of self-representation that mediate social media either through status updates that narrate our belief or images that demonstrate it. The traditional idea of witnessing one’s Christian faith to strangers and hoping to convert them now takes other supplementary forms such as regularly clicking the various “share” buttons to circulate Bible verses, sermons, personal testimonies, prayers, prophetic declarations, reflection on one’s faith, selfies taken in church, videos of the self while praying, polemical arguments about religious conduct of others, and status updates of people who validate our faith. Because social media prioritizes the visual, people show themselves performing their faith and such display has preeminence over simply telling others what and how one believes. People who identify by a faith practice now converge in a place and show off their belief modes, and the practices of their faith get further embedded into social life as mediated by virtual spheres.

Despite the notion of sources of power as supernatural, religious leaders have been pragmatic enough to appreciate that for that power to make things happen, it always needs political potency to back up the force of its pronouncements. Religious leaders work to achieve this efficacy by imitating the trappings of political power and by fraternizing with political authorities. Such association entails religious leaders lending the symbols through which they produce spiritual power to consecrate popular politics. This trade-off can be damaging if politicians fail in their promises of developing the conditions that make for social flourishing. The exposure of religion to the contentious arena of high-stakes politics also means that as a faith movement like

Pentecostalism moves from the margins to the mainstream, it also shifts from being a countercultural movement to becoming an integral part of the political power structure. The resistance impulses that dominant ideologies incite in the public space would eventually touch the leaders of faith too.

In Nigeria, since 1999 when the Fourth Republic started and the Pentecostal movement began to gain greater national attention, much of the promises of a more fulfilling existence within the emergent democratic system have not materialized. Governance itself, as Nimi Wariboko describes, has in fact, become a source of collective trauma.⁵ People have not only grown disillusioned, they are also increasingly alienated. Optimism about social change has waned as different government administrations got into power and failed to fulfill the promises of a better life. The discontent and the uncertainty mean that the traditional voices of moral authority falter as they struggle to hold society together. People who cannot immediately access the spaces where state power is produced eventually create an alternative sphere where they express their disillusionment, and also build up influence and social prestige, symbolic forms of capital commutable to other forms.

With globalized modern technology, the ubiquity of technological devices, and the multiplication of social networks, social media was the site where people seeking more organic sources of authority turned. As the appurtenances of social media technology have exploded in Africa, so has also social media use and political participation.⁶ Some people, in the emerging tradition of social media influencers, do the work of public intellectuals, demonstrating the ability to critically reflect on social conditions. While not always academics or even scholarly in their approach, they nevertheless generate their moral weight by building a competency profile on social networking sites. Their embeddedness in internet structures and their mastery of the vernacular of social media means their contributions take the convivial, contrarian, and abbreviated natures of social media dialogues. With their consistency in providing useful and accessible commentary on social situations, they have acquired influential power

⁵ Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Incredible*; Wariboko, *Ethics and Society in Nigeria*.

⁶ Chatora, “Encouraging Political Participation in Africa.”

by establishing themselves as credible experts in a specialized line of thought or industry, generating an appeal to a niche audience, building a community of loyal disciples and followers, and eventually acquiring clout as a form of authority. Not quite rising enough to be designated “celebrity activist” or online celebrity, and not quite qualifying to be described as “online activist” either, these social media users are regular people whose activities appeal to an audience broad enough to make them distinct influencer figures. In their own way, they are thinkers and intellectuals who have found a platform on social media to interest different people with similar aesthetic inclinations, grievances, and taste for notoriety for both civil debates and contentious exchanges.

In this work, I will be referring to this category of people as opinion entrepreneurs, meaning that they are organizers of culture whose mixed measures of intellectual capacity, warmth, social standing, perspicacity to pinpoint and weigh in on current issues, and passion for social causes gives them the impact of an influencer. Part of the appeal of their work is created through presentation of their digital self in everyday life.⁷ By sharing snippets of their work/life, personal and family images/videos, random thoughts, ideas, witty remarks, and even some notoriety as a demonstration of their innate subversiveness, they put forward a curated performance stand as “authentic” credible interveners in social causes and also as bricklayers in the construction of meanings that determine society’s ethos.⁸ From Facebook to Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, blogs, and various social media networks, these people do a lot of cultural work discoursing on ongoing world affairs. They are digital intellectuals, entrepreneurs of thoughts and opinions. The degree of labor and the almost endless hours involved in producing commentary and moderation of their page(s) might not be immediately apparent, but the comments of their regular followers indicate they are appreciated for the work they do. Their deft storytelling skills, timely response to ongoing social and political issues, ability to develop and cogently articulate thoughts

⁷ This is obviously an allusion to Erving Goffman’s famous *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that treated daily life as a performance.

⁸ As noted, authenticity in this context is also constructed. As Elizabeth Ellcessor noted, “Instead of the distant aura maintained by stars in classic Hollywood, celebrities online are constructed through the presentation of (seemingly) authentic, accessible, backstage selves that are nonetheless exceptional” (“One Tweet to Make So Much Noise,” 257).

within the crowded marketplace of opinions and regular outbursts of social media, do not just underscore their authenticity but are also a measure of their credibility and competence to lift cultural weights.

Now even considered a legitimate career trajectory thanks to models of digital capitalism, the ability of these entrepreneurs of opinion to gather a crowd and consecrate ideas also return some commercial gain for those who have successfully discerned audience tastes and desires. This category of intellectuals and their social media followers are a product of new social arrangements that have not only thrown them up as part of the production of power that calibrates balances in society, they are also strategically placed in various corners of social media for niche audiences. In this chapter, I will also be exploring how the dominance of Pentecostal culture and its charismatic proponents – the pastorate, mostly – in public and political spheres opened them up to virulent attacks by a growing subculture of these social media intellectuals, opinion entrepreneurs, and a wider public that have come to consider their prominence in political spheres as a part of the oppressive networks of power in the country. With the ease and ability of religious groups to communicate with a far more expansive audience has also come challenges to the stability of religious authority and the nature of established religious practices.⁹ Much of the challenge to the Pentecostal force of authority in contemporary Nigeria takes place on social media networks, a space so open that it could collapse various values, motives, and even religious beliefs into homogenized chunks of resentment and pushback. Here, I explore what significant development in the universe of Nigerian Pentecostalism like technological empowerment – and the subsequent buildup of dissension that reverberates from the religious to the social to the political – among participants in virtual spaces portends for faith and moral citizenship.

Much of the contest that I explore in this chapter took place between 2017 and 2018, when an online radio presenter in Lagos, Ifedayo Olarinde, popularly called Daddy Freeze, started a social media campaign against the practice of tithe payment in churches. That drive would eventually become the *Free the Sheeple* campaign. I consider Daddy Freeze an opinion entrepreneur because his advocacy agenda on tithe, based on a rereading of familiar scriptures, gained ground and

⁹ Bunt, *iMuslims*; Grant et al., *Religion Online*; Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*; Howard, *Digital Jesus*.

exploded among the populace. His campaign was influential; his confidence in what he vehemently propounded resounded with the populace and shook the Pentecostal church establishment. His ability to touch on something within the social culture demonstrated his cultural savviness and the perspicacity to apprehend a truth that riles people and which must be addressed. Pentecostal pastors were not new to harsh criticisms of their practices, but when it did not threaten their power identity or the modes by which they performed it, they have almost always acted impervious to them. However, the popularity of Daddy Freeze’s campaign pushed them from their seemingly impregnable positions into defensive – and even discrediting – stances. What started with social media posts and commentary on the subject of how paying tithes lacked scriptural backing found an online audience of people for whom the level of power and influence wielded by pastors had already reached an unaccountable height.

Amidst the hoopla that *Free the Sheeple* generated, Mrs. Funke Adejumo, the wife of the president of Agape Christian Ministries in Akure and a well-known preacher in her own right, remarked in alarm during different sermons that “Everything Christianity represents is being attacked on the Internet! Everything the Bible represents is being attacked online!”¹⁰ In one of those sermons that have now been archived online, she warned the congregation,

Everything the Bible represents is being attacked online. Tithing. It is an attack of the devil to diminish Christianity. One man in China said that in 100 years’ time, there will be no more Bibles in the world. One hundred years after, his house became the printing press for the Bible. You can’t fight against God. It was God that instituted tithing. Don’t join them o, just pass They use their mouths and pens to attack men of God and say all sorts of things. Don’t join them! Their suffering is loading. Just pass.¹¹

The moral panic she voiced betrays the fear with which powerful pastors now have to contend: the destabilization of the religious truths and traditions that Pentecostalism has established, thanks to the empowering tool of the Internet that gives the public an avenue to undercut the dominance of pastoral authority. Her specificity in locating the looped distribution network of the Internet as the chaotic arena

¹⁰ “Pastor Funke Adejumo Joins the Tithes Controversy in This Ranting Speech.” NijaBox, June 11, 2018. www.facebook.com/nijabox/videos/222444281690137/

¹¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pTML1YcHXY

where people congregate to challenge their moral authority also acknowledges pastors’ powerlessness in the face of social media’s ability to “instigate alternative politics of belonging” in competition with the regulatory power of political and religious authorities.¹² In the pre-Internet era, for a campaign like *Free the Sheeple* to go through the media, it would have had to contend with gatekeepers who could have considered criticisms of pastors a disruption of social stability. The gatekeepers’ decisions might even have been incommoded by the thought of the massive revenue that media entrepreneurs generate from the churches who buy airtime or media space to broadcast their programs.

The Internet, however, is a borderless space with multiple entry points. With a technological contraption in their hand and rebellion on their minds, people can follow the lead of an intellectual figure in pulling down the pillars of culture or carve their own smaller individual paths. Similar to how Pentecostal leaders established themselves on the social scene through the force of supernatural power that translated into social power and moral influence, the Internet grants dissenters similar pulpits from where they could antagonize their way into the sphere of moral authority that Pentecostal leaders have dominated. These cadres of influencers have become popular and their followership ranks swelled, and that is also because there is no foolproof means of barring participation in these debates. Virtually anyone can set up social media accounts and dedicate them to circulating memes and caricaturing Pentecostal practices and pastoral conduct, or impersonate men of God to critique pastoral authority, write critical social media posts denouncing pastors’ sermons, create YouTube channels or even make live videos to comment on doctrines and practices, and acquire a following while doing any or all of these. If the criticisms of pastors had been formalistic theological disputes on church doctrines and practices, that could have been a turn-off for this excitable online crowd. In this case, however, what was required to lead or participate was mostly any form of response to the constant stream of digital stimuli. With such diverse and relatively easy means of taking them on, pastors have more anxiety about being ridiculed in these bursts and cycles of social media performances than from legalistic arguments.

¹² Meyer & Moors, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*.

From controversies to scandals, people jump on trending conversations to dissect and critique, and in the process, also psychologically and socially stimulate themselves to a higher level of interactivity. As social media following has become monetizable in contemporary times, some of the thought leaders – like social media influencers – around whom people gather, have had to become more innovative and even employ marketing tactics to attract followership and induce participation.¹³ The will to partake in these digital conversations, the Pavlovian urge to give an urgent and immediate response to an ongoing discussion, becomes more intense among social media users, and the stakes of participation are thus raised. In cyber engagements, people do not always jump on conversations arbitrarily. They tend to cluster around influential figures, and, depending on the issue at stake, they gather around a specific thinker whose creation of both mentally engaging and equally enjoyable commentary on social issues.

When Daddy Freeze started taking on well-known pastors with his opinions shared on social media, he was stimulating enough to draw a broad range of participants for whom the *Free the Sheeple* campaign had either resonated or who had shown up in defense of their leaders. The scathing criticisms of pastors on social media that he led, though grounded on the Bible, also included pointed personal attacks. Different groups of commentators responded, leading to crossfires and thrilling exchanges that also satisfied the desire for entertainment. That in itself – the satiation of the unending desire to be tickled – made those campaigns a potent strike against pastoral power and moral authority. They extended the issues among different camps of social media users who also wanted a cut of the benefits of leading those arguments.

As an idea triggered in a remote corner of someone’s personalized social media space becomes a social performance that virally infects the attitudes and sensibilities of others, so does the playfulness of the actors draw a large online audience of those poised for some kind of show-down. Given her experience as a Pentecostal pastor, Mrs. Adejumo must have instinctively understood how these various social media users, led by a band of opinion entrepreneurs, influence public culture and could also acquire some level authority through their demonstrated ability to grow and affectively move an audience or give weight

¹³ Hund & McGuigan, “A Shoppable Life.”

to a public opinion. Given time, these opinion entrepreneurs could even shift the norms that generate social meanings, possibly undermine pastors' place in the cultural production of power, and negatively impact how Pentecostal Christians perform their power identity in the social sphere. Hence the charge to the congregations whom she repeatedly warned about how the Bible and Christianity were being diminished through the agency the social media has made possible for a contemporary public: *don't join them!*

Freeing the Sheeple: Daddy Freeze and the Awakening

For many years, pastors in Nigeria had used the Bible to justify their aggressive demand for tithes – that is, 10 percent of one's personal income given to the church – and were hardly ever challenged on the doctrine from the scriptural point of view. They have preached that it was a covenant obligation for material success. Failure to pay tithe would lead people to financial ruin because God would curse them for failure to meet to their responsibility. There have been issues raised about the morality of pastors taking percentages of people's income, but none of the contention gained traction like *Free the Sheeple*. By the time Daddy Freeze started speaking and mobilizing the denizens of the internet space who shared his postulations on tithes, not only had payment of tithe become a standard practice in Pentecostal churches, there were a lot more other specialized forms of church offerings that pastors also regularly demanded for various reasons. In 2017, a video of Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the leader of arguably the largest Pentecostal assembly denomination in Nigeria, asking members who could donate one billion naira each (going by the exchange rate that year, that sum was roughly \$2.8 m) to see his secretary after the church service went viral. Even though pastors demanding an outrageous amount of money from the congregation was not new, casually asking for one billion naira during a church service still seemed like an overreach and abuse of pastoral office. Within the context of a society where corruption was endemic, people questioned if the pastors who could ask for such a whopping sum of money from the congregation ever spared a thought to consider if the source of that money was legitimate.

By the time Daddy Freeze started raising questions about the validity of tithe payment in churches, the foundation for the enthusiastic reception of his message had been laid by the degree of resentment that

pastors' conduct around money had caused. Daddy Freeze at first did not look the image of a prophet or reformist. Like most pastors who went into church ministry, he was not a trained theologian, neither was he known to have attended a seminary or similar institution. He was an online radio presenter and entertainer with social media handles claiming the authority of divine revelation just like most pastors too had done when they started their ministry. But he was a Pentecostal Christian too, and according to Daddy Freeze himself, he also enjoyed studying church and Bible history. When he emerged on the social scene armed with questions for pastors, he did not come with mere curiosity. He also displayed a confidence in his knowledge of the Scriptures that caught the public's attention. The crux of his argument was nowhere in the Bible was tithing mandated for Christians and, despite pastors' insistence, the tithe was not a route to divine blessings and prosperity as pastors preached.¹⁴ He said if Nigerians studied the Bible by themselves and did not merely rely on the words of their pastors, they would see that the supposed commandment to give a tithe in the book of Malachi 3:8–10 were not meant for present-day Christians but the Levites, a priestly lineage and one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

He denounced the whole practice of tithing, saying it was exploitative and making poor people pay tithe was a subversion of the principles God put in place in ancient times to protect the poor and the vulnerable.¹⁵ He frequently challenged pastors to show him one place where Jesus or any of the Apostles collected tithes or even offerings from the people who congregated around them. In one of his media interviews he looked straight at the camera and with his finger pointed in the direction of the viewer, he said,

If you pay a tithe to any Nigerian pastor, you are a goat. Especially if you neglect what you are supposed to do. I have had people argue with me, *so you think I am giving my money to my pastor? I am giving it to God!* Hello? The transfer of earthly wealth to spiritual wealth was done in the Bible in Matthew 25 and it has nothing to do with pastors. You want to give your money to Jesus? The Bible says the people who are in hospitals. Matthew 25. It is right there. The people who are homeless, the people who are hungry, the people who are naked. Jesus said each time you give to those people, you

¹⁴ www.pulse.ng/communities/religion/daddy-freeze-any-pastor-who-takes-tithe-from-the-poor-is-putting-his-family-under-a/jk1sdnp

¹⁵ www.pulse.ng/communities/religion/daddy-freeze-religious-activist-insists-that-jesus-is-against-tithing-see-sowing/wdwr10z

remember me. So if you want to give to Jesus, those are the ones you should help and not the private jet-flying Daddy G.O. who should be giving to you.¹⁶

His campaign agenda was the climax of years of criticisms of pastors and their management of church finances. However, this time, the discussions snowballed through the intoxicating power of the new media that enabled the instant and wide circulation. People began to respond to Daddy Freeze on social media, newspaper op-eds, daytime TV shows, and vox pops. People agreed with him on pastors' attitude toward money and their lack of accountability to the same public that gives the money to the churches. Those who had expressed similar sentiments in the past dredged them up again, now emboldened by how the advocacy was catching on with the public. This moment instigated by Daddy Freeze was different from past criticism of pastors, because it was fueled by easier access to social media and other forms of accessibility sponsored by digital technology. *Free the Sheeple* was a far more interactive and communally based performance of freedom to speak back at established authority. Technological affordances and the ubiquity of internet-enabled devices had spawned new forms of religious engagement, appropriations, and remediations in Africa,¹⁷ and the intensity with which people responded to *Free the Sheeple* was consequent of the brave new world they now inhabited.

The popularity of *Free the Sheeple* – advocating intense public scrutiny of church finances – registered public disenchantment with pastors who, having acquired immense symbolic capital and social power, also accumulated a matching level of resources over the years. The campaign seemed confusing terrain for the leaders to navigate. Although their production of a sacred economy that nurtured God was based on market-driven operations appropriated straight from secular economies, the means of making money was largely not disclosed. They have not only been beneficiaries of capitalist and neoliberalist enterprises, they have also flaunted their worldly goods as testimonies of God's promises of abundant blessing.¹⁸ Like other social actors in a late capitalist economy whose exhibition and consumption of material goods is disconnected from any tangible production sites, pastors

¹⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWPjBzau_W8

¹⁷ Hackett & Soares, *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*.

¹⁸ Lewison, "Pentecostal Power and the Holy Spirit of Capitalism"; Ukah, "Piety and Profit (Part 1)"; Ukah, "God Unlimited."

actively promote the mystique of the “occult economy,”¹⁹ that is, the belief that money can be magically produced. Without visible connections to the social relations of power and entrepreneurial savviness that actually produce money for churches and pastors, the money they exhibit acquired a self-legitimizing autonomy that enabled pastors to raise their public images above the actual exploitation that goes into processes of wealth generation in capitalist economies.

For instance, in one of the churches that I attended some years ago, the pastor narrated how he was once stranded in a hotel room and prayed hard and passionately for money. By the time he woke up in the morning, his bedroom had been filled with dollar notes that had rained throughout the night. This kind of story of a God that could command a global currency and iconic marker of capitalism for the use of his servant is strategic in its telling. The pastor was promoting a myth of how money can be magically (or miraculously) acquired over the carnal human systems that are actually involved in making money materialize as a reality. Such accounts are intended to avert the congregation’s eyes from looking directly at the amorality that typifies the capitalist system of exchanges and instead look up to the heavens and perceive money as a miracle. By redacting the social processes, entrepreneurial struggles, market systems, and political relationships of power that organize the rewards that translate into wealth, this pastor could also effect a disconnection between his spiritual gifts and a potential accusation of simony. As several scholars have noted, Nigerian Pentecostals pastors have not only preached the prosperity gospel and encouraged people to sow their financial seeds into God’s business, they have also taken up entrepreneurship in many forms that have diverged from their primary vocation as pastors.²⁰ Despite their ventures into mercantilism using funds mostly generated from the church, they still do not consider themselves the kinds of businessmen who should be subject to the secular standards of accountability.

The *Free the Sheeple* campaign challenged the assumption that the noble duty of producing a sacred place put pastors beyond the crass pursuit of money. The campaign also gave vent to latent unease with

¹⁹ Comaroff & Comaroff, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction.”

²⁰ Hackett, “The Gospel of Prosperity in West Africa”; Ukah, “God Unlimited”; Ukah, “Prophets for Profit.” See also: Ukah, “Building God’s City”; Ukah, “God, Wealth & The Spirit of Investment”; Ukah, “Piety and Profit (Part 2)”; Ukah, “Those Who Trade with God Never Lose.”

pastors' wealth and how they have flaunted it as proof of divine favor. Perhaps the biggest achievement of the anti-tithe campaign was the forceful centering of money into the social relational practices that have also imbued pastors with their consecrating authority. Calling out Pentecostal pastors to account for the wealth that defined their public images can furthermore be construed as a conscientization agenda, an awakening to the human factors in the mix of resources that generated their grandiose wealth. The campaign was, to that extent, an attack on insensitive capitalism that underlay the foundation of cathedrals; the ungodly indifference that sidesteps the actual social processes of funds generation; and the unethical conditions that produced money for pastor's use and which compels them to treat it as a natural outcome of religious ritual and faith. In the ideological arena where pastors had operated, they had nurtured an economy of relations that made it acceptable for them to own so much without a concomitant level of accountability for their resources or concerns for social justice.

The pastors at the receiving end of Daddy Freeze's barrage of attacks were unprepared for the turn of events where the Internet that had broadened their sphere of influence would also be the site of its contestation. Until social media made it possible a crowd of people to converge in a place to challenge them, pastors had largely enjoyed a world where much of their authority was vertical. Most of the communication channels were controlled, quite unlike now when people can easily assemble in the vast grounds of the Internet to speak back. When pastors were pressed enough to respond to Daddy Freeze on the controversy, their answers mostly came in the form of *ad hominin* attacks. According to Daddy Freeze, when he began talking about tithe, "every pastor, every G.O., every senior pastor, every reverend priest, had something to say about the tithe debate." Because they came at him "guns blazing," he realized that "it is not God we are worshipping, it is mammon."²¹ Some of the pastors' attacks at Daddy Freeze were so indecorous that they further played into the hands of supporters of the campaign, and the (wo)men of God incurred on themselves a level of ridicule and antagonism that would have been previously unthinkable for their social status. The pastors probably imagined that Daddy Freeze's attack on their practices would

²¹ Personal interview.

fizzle out, but *Free the Sheeple* garnered supporters who agreed that there was no indeed biblical support for the payment of tithe and that pastors should not have an infinite allocation of resources placed at their behest.

I met Daddy Freeze at his Lekki residence in Lagos, Nigeria, in summer 2019, for a conversation on how the campaign had played out. He delved into the problems of Nigerian religion and why the shortcomings of the Pentecostal church necessitated the freeing of the “sheeple” from the clutches of predatory preachers. He had many criticisms for how churches had wired people to connect salvation with money such that every idiom of spirituality is currently about boosting personal prosperity and acquiring more worldly goods. For instance, he cited a popular phrase like “unmerited favor,” which Nigerian Pentecostals have used to describe miraculous happenings that have improved their lives, usually by improving their financial lot. For Daddy Freeze, the idea of “unmerited favor” ought to describe the undeserved salvation that sinners received from Jesus Christ. Rather, churches have taught people to orient the ideas encoded into such phrases toward getting richer. Even worse, they encourage the procurement of such undeserved wealth in ways that did not accommodate moral compunction. The wealth people pass off as divine blessings can be directly linked to the mechanisms of corruption in the society. The idea of “unmerited favor” would allow them to sidestep the immorality, capitulate to the corrupting forces in the society, and institutionalize an ethic that would promote ill-gotten wealth as divine favor, an “unmerited” one.

Daddy Freeze ramped up the scale of his criticisms to the point that pastors could not ignore him. When he narrated his experience with the pastors, he recalled he had his greatest moments of clarity when he went public with the revelations that he had been receiving from Christ. At some point, he had hoped to be wrong with his claims and expected the pastors to set him straight.

I could not believe that the G.O. (General Overseer) that was in his '70s, who has gathered 10 million people all over the world, could ever be wrong and I would be right. I waited for them to come up with some strong arguments of their position on tithe, but they came with nothing. They shared experiences of how tithe has worked for them, but nothing from the Bible.²²

²² Ibid.

To his consternation, the rebuttal he received was more personal attacks than theological positions drawn from the Bible. Pastors attacked his personal life, they preached against him on the altar and even cursed him, but they still did not advance a biblical stand to support their position. He said,

A pastor whose church I attended for more than 11 years; a man that was entrusted to teach the word cursed me. He said he gave me 24 months to see my end ... why? Because I dared him to show us in the Bible where the apostles who were our first pastors and Daddy G.O.s collected tithe. This was a man to whom I entrusted my tithes and offering for 11 years. I contributed to the building of his current temple, and he curses me?²³

The pastors' best argument, he eventually found, was that the gospel they preached to people was working, and that should constitute enough proof of its efficacy. While the pastors that contended with him had an idea of supernatural operations whose ends justified the means, Daddy Freeze contended that the means and processes matter far more and experience should not override scriptural authority. He said, “‘*It is working*’ is not a doctrine. It cannot stand the test of time unless it founded on the Scriptures. They (the pastors) don't know much, the only thing they know is the worship of the God they created. They became experts on that, and they were leading people into sin.”

Some pastors, he said, labeled him a demon and called him a “God-hater,” “Jesus-hater,” and “pastor-hater.” The overwhelming scale of attacks did not just come from the pastors but also the Pentecostal congregation who pushed back against his irreverence. According to him, even his job as an entertainer was attacked. When they could not get him fired at Cool FM, the radio station where he worked in Lagos, they got some advertisers to pull back from his show. Those moments, anyway, he said bolstered his firm resolve to “free the sheeple” from the clutches of Pentecostal dogma and pastors that propagate it. With the spate of attacks that followed *Free the Sheeple*, Daddy Freeze said he became emboldened to further demystify Christianity as presently constituted and introduce a more rational form of faith that would empower people to clarify between doctrines of God and human traditions that are contingent on social realities. He told me about a certain pastor who, ten years prior, had requested that his church members

²³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pTML1YcHXY

give their tithes in N1,000 notes (the highest denomination of the Nigerian currency) rather than smaller naira denominations. This pastor, Daddy Freeze said, told his people that if they gave in bigger notes, they would receive their blessings in bigger packages.

Now, people go to church and make electronic bank transfers and so that pastor no longer preaches that people should bring their offerings in N1,000 notes anymore. The Holy Spirit opened my eyes to that the reason the pastor ever demanded the bigger notes in the first place was so they could count the money they collect as offering more easily. It saves time and labor of church workers if they are not dealing with smaller notes. But the pastor made it into a doctrine and taught the people it was God’s will. It is unfair to manipulate people with your personal agenda.²⁴

Therefore, his goal was to teach people the word of God in an empowering manner so they could learn to study the Bible on their own and learn to separate between doctrines of God and contingent church traditions. He said, “The church is not a building, or the physical structure. That one was brought down by Jesus who also fulfilled his promise to replace it in three days.” Pastors, he said, would not preach a gospel of spiritual temple because it would entail a de-emphasizing of the need for the huge cathedrals they raise money to build, and even the flashy wealth they get to exhibit as proof of the effectiveness of their gospel.

Daddy Freeze also consistently referred to himself as “teacher of the Word” and it did not matter to him that he was not formally ordained by anyone because, according to him, neither Jesus Christ nor Charles Fox Parham (an ascribed founder of what became the Pentecostal movement) were formally ordained either. None of the pastors taking him on, he contended, were formally trained in the Scriptures either: they operated based on divine revelation. Daddy Freeze said his goal was for God’s Word to be taught to God’s people, and the delivery of the gospel to the people need not impoverish the congregation in its packaging and transmission. Rather than incur heavy expenses in the logistics of assembling people under one roof, he could make videos of his teachings, share them, and respond to his “congregation” in the comments section of social media. The goal of his model of “churching” was to teach people God’s Word based on an undiluted ideology

²⁴ Ibid.

as Christ intended it to be, not as powerful preachers have fashioned for their own uses. His end mission is to breed an independent Christianity where people can read the Scriptures for themselves and come to their own understanding. Interestingly, Daddy Freeze does this churching business, particularly on Instagram, along with his other vocation as an entertainer/public commentator. This seamless combination of roles often blurs the line between the “pastor” side of him and the OAP.

Daddy Freeze’s argument’s about non-ordination also underscores an important idea in the liberalism of Pentecostalism. If, as Edward Cleary noted of Pentecostalism in Latin America, one of the greatest theological achievements of Pentecostalism as differentiated from orthodox churches is the right to free expression – that is, “almost anyone accepted by the Pentecostal community is allowed to interpret scripture during worship, to moralize about the conditions of life, to preach about changes needed in personal conduct, to pray spontaneously, to offer suggestions for the community’s response to an evil world,” it follows that members would also extend that freedom to contest power with their pastors.²⁵ That kind of development, expectedly, makes pastors more conservative as they scramble to protect their moral authority from spontaneous outbursts of dissonance among congregations.

Quite antagonistic of the present church system and how much time it robs from daily productivity, Daddy Freeze had the opinion that churches should even have fewer meetings. He said while Jesus attended the synagogue on Sabbath day, there was no record that he did so *every* Sabbath day. While one can argue that there is also no proof that Jesus did *not* go to the synagogue every Sabbath day, his point is that people should not have to go to church perform religious rites all the time before being deemed Christians. Given the level of social development in Nigeria, he believes there is a need for a critical reevaluation of the ethics and values of a faith movement that has failed to give the people the succor that they seek from God. People should not spend all their time in churches; they should have enough time left in their daily lives to do other things than congregate to pray. A church, he insisted, should not have to set up expensive and massive buildings at the expense of people who are massively poor and make them contribute to church wealth.

²⁵ Cleary, *Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America*, 7.

He argues that pastors' obsession with putting up church monuments has made them more invested in the relentless competition to build the largest church complex, a factor that is driving them to manipulate already impoverished people who should be fed with the truth of God's Word. Nigerian churches have lost their way, he says, and become too invested in projects of self-aggrandization. They are personalizing and paganizing the gospel, he complained. "You see, the early churches used to fight principalities and powers in terms of the financial and political systems that tried to suppress the will of God. Today, they – the Nigerian pastors – have all but reduced 'powers and principalities' to personalities, the aunties in the village (un)doing you."²⁶ In our conversation, Daddy Freeze slides easily from a mishmash of references from Freud to Max Weber, European church history, and social history to criticize the present Nigerian Pentecostal church. "In Lutheran times," he said, "the church leaders could hide things from people because the Bible was in Latin. These days, they just dumb down the Scriptures." To stop people from venerating pastors' word over God's, Daddy Freeze says he is committed to a demystification of the pastors and the spiritual hold they wield over the people. "I want people to know that pastors are mere humans. They are not more anointed than they are, and they cannot harm you." The threat of harm that could come upon anyone who spoke against a pastor, and which they had held over the populace for a long time, was empty. Daddy Freeze said after he challenged all the pastors in Nigeria to curse him with all their spiritual powers – and some did, they publicly pronounced he would die – and nothing happened to him, it became obvious to him that all the supernatural power with which they had always instigated reverence for themselves was mere superstition.²⁷ By announcing that he did not die despite all the curses and death pronouncements they made against him on the altar, he believes he demystified the faith leaders. Or, at least, he lessened their "pastoral (bio-)power," that is, their authority as God's representatives on earth to determine to proclaim social, supernatural and eventually

²⁶ Personal interview.

²⁷ In one of his interviews, he mentioned how when he first stopped paying tithes, he feared he would die because of the years of teaching that had made him believe that the sanction for not paying tithes was death. After about four months of not paying he still lived, and he got bolder. www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIaOy4AZqR8

physical death on an erring person, one of the techniques of fear and submission that charismatic religion has exercised.²⁸ That experience of freedom from the threat of imminent death also taught him that if more people could study the Bible independently, they would not merely accept pastoral authority but would be more questioning of their teachings.

The *Free the Sheeple* moment Daddy Freeze prompted also influenced other people who needed to speak their minds on church financing and lack of accountability; others who saw an opportunity to generate social media content by taking on powerful and famous pastors also joined the debate. Since pastors are considered powerful public figures, they were the prime targets of a society that had not only had enough of their overwhelming influence, but who have also found in digital technology a viable means of confronting them on their doctrines and public conducts. People found in the Internet a significant means of defying oppressive doctrines through the weaponization of their social media content. With opinion entrepreneurs, the church now has to contend with social media reformers whose social media handles and witty content ceaselessly nail theses to the church doors. Pastors, whose power identity has been based on their ability to spontaneously act under the influence of the immanent Holy Spirit while on the pulpit, now contend with the burden of hyper-surveillance and the nagging worry their sermons could become a meme online. In the next section, I will be looking at the aftermath of Daddy Freeze's campaign and the various performances it spurred among a general class of people who demonstrate their civic citizenship and dissension with ruling authority by taking on pastors in the same way they now take down their politicians and public leaders on social media to the extent that the latter advocate some degree of regulation.

The Radical Congregation of Social Media

One of the pastors who responded to the fracas about *Free the Sheeple* made an interesting observation about contemporary religion and the expressions of discontent with its practices as are done on the Internet. While he was responding on the issue of tithes, Bishop Emmah Isong, currently the national publicity secretary of the Pentecostal Fellowship

²⁸ Katsaura, "Theo-urbanism."

of Nigeria, decried the “anti-church elements” that “live inside the internet.” He said these people are the ones who ensure that “if a pastor steals yam, it goes viral.”²⁹ Bishop’s Isong’s frustration also underscores the reality of the futuristic world that we already inhabit: we no longer “go online” as a form of transcendence of spaces that we log into and out of, now and then. We are now permanent – and connected – residents of the digital cosmos whose engagement on social media spaces is homologous to our inhabitation of physical and social spaces. The advantage of social media networks over earlier media forms is their ability to collapse many conversational arenas into a solitary sphere, enabling mobility between discursive spaces. The fact that church business is one of the many topics of discussions on the broad forum of social media adds another dimension to previous scholarship on religion and new media, much of which has been overly optimistic in assessing the prospects that lay ahead of faith practices in the digital era.³⁰

People are literally living “inside” the Internet, and from their habitation of virtual reality, they are firing scud missiles at errant pastors. New technologies have always facilitated the expression of disenchantment with religion and religious leaders, although scholars sometimes treat such radical expression as a novel meeting of religion and technology. They, still attached to the idea that religion is subjective and therefore, antithetical to the universal, empirical, objective, and rational science that founded technology, look for convergence points.³¹ According to Jeremy Stolow, in this manner of thinking, there is an underlying supposition in these ideas that religion and technology,

exist as two ontologically distinct arena of experience, knowledge, and actions. In common parlance, the word *religion* typically refers to the intangible realms of ritual expression, ethical reasoning, affect, and belief whereas the word *technology* points to the material appurtenances, mechanical operations, and expert knowledge that enable humans to act upon, and in concert

²⁹ Uchechukwu, “Tithing Is a Scriptural Injunction, Mandatory, but Not Compulsory – Bishop Isong.”

³⁰ Brasher, *Give Me that Online Religion*; Campbell, “Challenges Created by Online Religious Networks”; Campbell, “Religious Authority and the Blogosphere”; Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*; Hammerman, *thelordismyshepherd.com: Seeking God in Cyberspace*.

³¹ Radde-Antweiler & Zeiler, *Mediatized Religion in Asia*.

with the very tangible domains of nature and society. The locution *religion and technology* thus operate along a series of analogous binaries including *faith and reason, fantasy and reality, enchantment and disenchantment, magic and science, fabrication and fact*.³²

Rather than religion and technology supposedly struggling against each other's innate attributes, *Free the Sheeple* and its aftermath exemplifies how the devices with which people access the Internet are far too fused with their bodies and minds to distinguish between religion and other activities that take place on the cyberspace. There is no "religious" use of the Internet (social media, that is) that is not at the same time social and political. With the imbrication of humans to their internet-enabled devices, the performances of citizen dissent in cyberspaces are enmeshed with the urgency of their sociopolitical and socio-economic conditions, which makes the expressions fiercer and intensely radical. This, of course, does not mean there is a standard behavior of all "netizens," as individual dispositions are called "subjective" for a reason. However, like-minded people find each other online and take behavioral cues from one another. These connections have been made easier by the configuration of algorithms that track our psychographic behavior online and "serendipitously" sends matching sentiments and affects our way. The overlap between religious and political dissent cannot but happen when the spheres of religion, politics, and economics are open to each other, and their values transmute. Thus, religious leaders find that they have to be answerable to spiritual forces and temporal concerns expressed on social media as well.

With the multiplicity of cyber-fora linked to social media pages and run by different individuals, *Free the Sheeple's* anti-tithe movement generated many comments codified into memes, videos, images, blogs, vlogs, street vox pops, YouTube videos, TV and radio interviews, social media discussions, and online commentaries. Many of the discussions were aimed directly at the pastors and their conduct. As some of the commentaries were rather cutting, people worried that undermining pastoral authority would deplete the force of Christianity and attributed the development to a demonic attack on the church. They pushed back furiously, but even their participation only ramped up the scale of the controversy. As the issue raged, multiple bloggers further expanded the scope of the discussion by taking snippets of pastors'

³² Stolow, *Deus in Machina*.

responses to Daddy Freeze on the tithe debate and compiling them into a whole to run commentary on them. By framing disparate responses into a coherent set of material, they made their blogs, social media accounts, or YouTube channels the proverbial village square where those looking to gather and talk about the issue could converge. On YouTube particularly, by attaching Daddy Freeze’s name to the title of their videos, theirs would be the video that would come up in the search. Also, by annotating the videos they had posted, they foregrounded the engagement and triggered more uproar.

For instance, in a vlog posted by Summer Aku on her YouTube channel and titled, *Nigerian Pastors Unite against Daddy Freeze: The Full Compilation of Pastors’ Responses (Tithe Drama)*, the video starts with texts rolling up the screen that introduce Daddy Freeze as the subject matter and then cuts to an interview where Daddy Freeze challenged Christians to challenge their pastors to teach Deuteronomy 14:22–25 and Matthew 23, verses of the Scripture that said people would eat their tithes but which pastors would never mention because it would affect their ability to generate income.³³ At some point in the interview Daddy Freeze said, “Let me see them stop collecting tithes. Let them stop for one year. Let’s see who will still be a pastor . . . Stop collecting tithes.”³⁴ Then he faced the camera directly and stated, “Preach the world that Jesus preached. At least Jesus did not collect tithes, Jesus fed the 5,000. In Nigeria, the 5,000 feeds these thieves.” As Daddy Freeze spoke, the blogger used an onscreen text to highlight that Daddy Freeze was sharing “more verses” and “and more verses” and “even more verses” of the Scripture, a preface to how she wanted his arguments to be read in comparison with the pastors she would also feature.

After the Daddy Freeze segment of the video, she introduced the pastors’ collated responses with onscreen text that says, “AND ALL THE REACTIONS BEGAN.” The pastors were not reacting to that interview by Daddy Freeze, but she selectively edited the clips to make them appear as a linear drama between him and the pastors. The blogger briefly analyzed the pastors’ rhetorical strategies and annotated the points in the video that she wanted people to note: where the

³³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzB2l3J-q38

³⁴ My choice of this clip was deliberate because it contains a compendium of responses by the pastors to Daddy Freeze.

pastors lacked Biblically based defenses, name-calling, bragging, mis-quoting the Bible, threatening, vibrating with anger, throwing allegations, and being overly defensive.

The video began to show pastors, some of the biggest names in Nigerian Pentecostalism responding to the tithe debate. The first was Pastor Adeboye who was speaking in a church service where he said:

I saw a clip on the internet by a fellow who said he was talking about tithes, that we shouldn't pay tithes. At first, I didn't want to listen but God said, "wait na." (At this point, the onscreen text showed "God said, wait na") and I continued to watch to see what he had to say. Then he said *tithe is supposed to be used to buy alcohol so we can drink in church*. I said, well, now we know who is talking. Even mad people don't go to church to drink alcohol. No matter how crazy somebody is, the moment you said this is a church, ask him to come and drink, he will say *ehn ehn ehn, I am not that crazy*. Because even in his madness, he knows when you say this is a house of God, he knows the house belongs to God. [italics are points where Pastor Adeboye takes on the voice of another character]

By highlighting the portion where Pastor Adeboye said God spoke to him in Nigerian pidgin, a creole variant of the Standard English, she undercut his strategic attempt to delegitimize Daddy Freeze's credibility. What Pastor Adeboye put forward as proof of his close relationship to God – nudging him to watch a video – became the joke when Adeboye insinuated that God spoke to him in a colloquial language (one that is also considered the lingua franca of a non-formally educated underclass). The screen went dark, and the blogger prefaced the next clip with texts that read, "And Signs of Anger & Frustration [*sic*]." The video showed Mrs. Adejumo speaking while the onscreen text read, "Cursing and Name Calling." In the video, she was saying:

Don't listen to any idiot telling you what to do about your money [some scattered applause could be heard in the church] on the internet. Hear me! I meant that statement, "idiot." Because anybody that is against the Scriptures is a fool! That is what the Bible says [the onscreen text asks, "Where is This in the Bible?"] Who told you not to pay tithe and who told you to pay it? Put the two of them on a scale and weigh them and choose who to follow [onscreen text reads: But no Bible verses]. Somebody telling you not to pay tithe. What right has he to determine how you spend your money? [scattered applause]. I know what happened to me. If an angel

comes now and tells me not to pay tithe, I am too convinced to be confused about it. [onscreen text: still no Bible verses]. Not all pastors are stealing money o! [onscreen text: Then Bragging]. When I was coming this year, I said *God, I gave N54,000 every Sunday last year by your grace. What should I do this year?* I heard in my spirit, ‘Double it!’ So every Sunday, N110,000.

Then came Apostle Johnson Suleman. As he started speaking, the screen text came on and indicated he would be “Bragging and Bragging.” Apostle Suleman began talking,

... about somebody talking about tithing. I have a PhD in theology and a PhD in Human Resource Administration not to argue. The Bible says in first Corinthians chapter two verse 14 [onscreen text: Quoting the Bible and Avoiding the Topic], the natural man cannot receive the things of God. They are foolishness to him. He cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned. It is stupidity for me to sit down and speak over spiritual matters with [onscreen text: Still Avoiding the Topic] logical reasoning. The Bible says in John chapter two from verse 20 down, it says you need not any man to teach you, but the anointing which you have received teaches you all things [the video cuts to a congregant nodding her head vigorously]. Your pastor or social media should not teach you about tithing. Go and ask God. We must be careful [onscreen text: Then Threat] so we differentiate religious rascality from spiritual maturity. There is so much religious rascality. To talk is cheap. To post things on the internet is very cheap [onscreen text: More Bragging]. I have read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation 36 times. Omega [that is the name of Apostle Suleman’s church] began in 2004 and I was already a millionaire before we started [onscreen text: And Then Big Lie]. The tithe I pray every Sunday is more than the tithe all of you pay for two Sundays. I am a dangerous tither, and I don’t hope to change.

Mrs. Adejumo came up again on the video (as excerpted previously), and then followed by Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo who said he would be responding to the tithe debate said,

Some bunch of yoyo somewhere should not determine what we believe. Some guy who beats his wife, throws her out, throws his children out of the house should not determine what we believe. Not only that, he broke his own son’s knees while trying to defend his wife. Not only that, he drinks alcohol, sleeps with women and he is trying to preach to preachers?

The onscreen text indicated that he was “name-calling” and “showing anger.” When it came to Pastor Paul Adefarasin, the onscreen text

cheekily said, “Now it is time to go to Galaxy” as the pastor started a message that truly took the issue to another planet entirely. He said,

God created the universe, he took a tithe: the Milky Way. God created the Milky Way, he took a tithe: the Galaxy. God created the Galaxy, he took a tithe: our Solar System. God created the Solar System, he took a tithe: Planet Earth. God created the Planet Earth, he took a tithe: Israel. God created Israel, he took a tithe: Jerusalem.

Other pastors featured including Pastor Ayo Oritsejeafor who said anyone who asked the congregation not to pay tithe simply wanted to kill them and they would die quickly if they did not pay. Just like Mrs. Adejumo, Pastor Oritsejeafor asked the congregation to compare the lives of their pastors who asked for tithe with that of the person who asked them not to, and they would see that the clear difference. Then he added in pidgin English, “The Bible says, the difference, is clear.” Again, the onscreen text noted that phrase, “the difference is clear” was a 7Up slogan and not from the Bible. Another pastor featured was Bishop David Oyedepo whose message compared tithes to excrement that must come out of the body, otherwise one would be discomfited. The final one was Pastor Adeboye again saying in what turned out to be a brief clip, “Make it clear to them. Anyone who is not paying his tithes is not going to heaven. Full stop.” At the end of the video, the text comment came up: *But why haven't they raised their voices like this about corruption in Nigeria?*³⁵ By attaching all the pastors' angst on tithe to one of the problems that faced Nigeria, the issue of corruption, she could connect the performances of pastors with the angst of everyday life in Nigeria and thereby indict the pastors' priorities.

The controversy of The Great Tithe Debate eventually cooled, especially after some other senior pastors such as Bishop Mike Okonkwo, Pastors Sam Adeyemi and Tunde Bakare intervened and clarified in their sermons that it was not (and should not be) doctrinally necessary for Christians to pay tithe. By taking that stand, they directly contradicted the other pastors who said those who fail to pay tithes were cursed and would not make it to heaven. They also noted to their fellow pastors that it was not necessary to frighten people to make them pay tithes. People should only do so if they desired to give to God.³⁶ Those

³⁵ Aku, “Nigerian Pastors Unite against Daddy Freeze.”

³⁶ “Pay Your Tithes Willingly and Not out of Fear – Bishop Mike Okonkwo”; Okoduwa, “Do Not Pay Tithe by Pastor Abel Damina”; “Pastor Sam Adeyemi

pastors, who also run megachurches and are also visible public figures, more or less officially removed one of the many threats of death and punishment hanging over the lives of people and which further complicate their already precarious existence. For a certain social class, tithe payment might not matter to their overall financial capability, but for millions of already impoverished people, not being under a spiritual obligation to pay could free up some money from their income so they could do more for themselves and their families. After people understood that tithe payment did not carry the punishment of death or the curse of poverty, and that they would not miss heaven at the end of a challenging life, they could still give 10 percent of their income to their church. Only now they would be doing it willingly.

However, the controversy also made it easier for pastors and the church to become regular fodder for social media talking about the flaws and foibles of powerful pastors. While Daddy Freeze's goal of reforming what he thought was lacking in the church was clear, others seemed to be looking to build an influencer base by initiating debates on polarizing topics of religion. For instance, a blog like NijaBox, linked to several social media handles, regularly posts articles and videos on social media with titles such as, *How Nigeria's Pastors Are Rich, Yet Their Church-Goers Will Never Board Their Private Jets*; *Popular Pastor Beaten in Church by Members*; *Nigerians Perceive Pastor Adeboye's Latest Prayer Leading to Corruption and Nepotism*, and so on. On its Facebook page where the blog has a far more active presence, NijaBox shares videos of church activities that include deliverance sessions, sermon clips, miracle performances, pastors performing frivolous acts (such as the videos of Pastor Chukwuemeka Odumeje dancing with his friends in church while the altar space is littered with currency notes they had sprayed on themselves), and other similar materials.

Some of the videos and reports NijaBox feature are already annotated with magisterial comments even before asking people their opinion. For instance, they will share a video and ask, "Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo warns his congregation to stop listening to controversy on social media around tithing because it is a command after the order of Melchizedek. He also went on to argue that seed sowing in monetary form is in the Bible. Your thoughts?" Another one states: "CONFESSION. This

Says the Practice of Tithing Has Expired, No Christian Should Feel Guilty for Not Tithing."

prophet is the son of Alph Lukau. He was seen last year making money appear from the Bible in South Africa. Today it looks like he is saying something else. The question remains has he repented from his magic tricks?" NijaBox sometimes also posts videos announcing church activity or videos where the pastor is speaking what it calls "the truth" (that is, denouncing activities of roguish pastors). The videos, meanwhile, are not limited to Nigerian preachers. For instance, they also shared a video of a preacher in Tennessee in the USA, Perry Stone, who – in the heat of praying and speaking in tongues – stops to check his phone. Other social media activities frequently fact-check pastors' messages, and provide critical commentary that can sometimes verge on rudeness.

Another example of how the acts of hyper-surveillance on church activities by social media users bothers the pastors is when Pastor Adeboye advised the youths in his church not to marry women who are lazy, cannot cook or do household chores, or cannot pray non-stop for an hour. He spoke in his church on fulfilling marital relationships but the message got on social media where what he preached attracted a lot of rude remarks.³⁷ He had spoken to both men and women, but the content about woman got far more attention. He said,

Don't marry a girl simply because she can sing! In the choir there are some people that can sing but they are fallen angels! Marry a prayer warrior! If a girl cannot pray for one hour, don't marry her. Don't marry a girl who is lazy! Don't marry a girl who cannot cook, she needs to know how to do chores and cook because you cannot afford to be eating out all the time. Don't marry a girl who is worldly! If you do, you have carried what you'll worship for the rest of your life! Don't forget what I am telling you. It's very important. There are those who I have advised before but ignored my advice. They later came back to me and said: "You warned us." I am warning you now.³⁸

While this kind of injunction has always been passed in churches without complaints, this remark got on social media and was attended by an outrage that subjected Adeboye to a lot of opprobrium by people who thought his ideas of balanced family life were outmoded. His critics called him "ignorant" and denounced him in strong language for feeding into patriarchal notions that the preponderance of the spiritual and physical labor that makes for a good family rests on the

³⁷ www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53488921

³⁸ "If a Girl Cannot Pray for One Hour, Don't Marry Her, Says Adeboye."

woman. By pushing back against his words with trending social media activity, they denied his moral vision for family life and his attempts at universalizing it using his gravitas as a representative figure of a faith movement that identifies by power. The pushback on that issue were so intense that he had to put up another comment on Twitter where he stated, “My messages are not for everybody. So I plead with you, ask God to speak to you specifically.”³⁹ The frequency of the attacks has embarrassed his church to the point that Adeboye himself pleaded with his church members to stop putting his words on YouTube.⁴⁰ The irony is that even that appeal ended up on social media. From the exchanges that followed the criticism of Adeboye’s ideas of what roles women should play in marriage (and in other instances where he had spoken on rape, social relationships, and wifehood), one could also see undertones of feminist ideology. When he wrote a birthday message for his wife on his Twitter message, and noted that his wife of about fifty years remained submissive to him and even still cooks his meals and trims his nails, he got fierce backlash against his male chauvinism.⁴¹ The media that reported the pushback noted that those who took him up were “feminists,” an indication that the ideology was percolating into society, but not through structured channels of academic debates, rather through deliberation and opinion entrepreneurship mostly on social media spaces where ideas are weaponized against influential pastors still wedded to patriarchal ideals and power.

Testing and Attesting Power Identity

That said, none of the encounters with social media opinion entrepreneurs make the Internet the Pentecostal graveyard, and the next chapter will dwell on the modes by which leaders’ authority is maintained even within an economy of public ridicule. Like earlier church reformation movements, the one that stems from the digital universe is more about believers trying to reclaim the essence, the potency, and the standards of spiritual practices of the early church for the

³⁹ www.pulse.ng/communities/religion/enoch-adeboye-my-messages-are-not-for-everybody-pastor/g472ew7

⁴⁰ Udodiong, “Pastor Urges Church Members to Stop Putting up His Videos or Quotes Online.”

⁴¹ <https://punchng.com/feminists-at-war-with-adeboye-over-birthday-message-to-wife/>

present day.⁴² Since churches are powerful organizations, and government agencies can hardly regulate their activities without inviting claims of persecution, it is more helpful to think of social media as a site of self-reinvention and a gradual generation of progressive cultural habits. For instance, earlier in 2017, when *Free the Sheeple* began to take on pastors, a government agency, the Financial Regulatory Council of Nigeria (FRCN), tried to implement a clause in the Corporate Governance Code that fixed tenure for leaders of corporate organizations including non-profit enterprises such as churches. The code, meant to improve organizations' financial accountability, indicated that a leader who had spent twenty years or more as CEO should leave their position. The code also barred those retiring leaders from handing their position over to a family member. Pastor Adeboye was one of those affected by the implementation of the code. He announced in church that he would retire as the General Overseer. He also named a successor, Joshua Obayemi, who would oversee the local church in Nigeria while remaining the worldwide leader and overseeing RCCG in the 192 countries they were now domiciled. In that same church service, he also registered his displeasure with government's interference in church affairs. He was quoted as saying, "The government has been showing increasing interest in church affairs. Unfortunately, for us in RCCG, it might not be very helpful."⁴³ As the news of his retirement hit the airwaves, it was instantly read as one of the many attempts of a Muslim president to muzzle Christianity and Islamize Nigeria. Pastors claimed that the government had no right to push them toward retirement since they were appointed by God and not by the state. Within forty-eight hours after his announcement and the furor that followed, the Executive secretary of the FRCN, Jim Obazee (also once a RCCG pastor), had been sacked and the code suspended. When the code was revised, it left out the churches. That affair with the FRCN was perhaps another reason the *Free the Sheeple* movement resonated with people when it began later that year.

The church leaders who would be affected used the weight of their public influence to make the government capitulate. With such a level

⁴² Drescher, *Tweet if You [Heart] Jesus*.

⁴³ www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/220007-breaking-buhari-sacks-official-whose-actions-led-adeboyes-exit-rccg-leader.html

of power available to Pentecostal pastors to influence public policy, it is obvious that churches cannot be made accountable in their financial dealings through formal and structured means. Nigeria’s ruling elite needs pastors as much as pastors need them. Pastors would not have been able to identify by power if they had not co-opted power to their side, and politicians cannot attain a needed level of moral authority without pastors. This balance of patronage means it is almost impossible for one side to try to check the other’s excesses. As raucous as the rhythms and rituals of social media participation could get, it also generates affects that are propped by social disaffection and all-round political disempowerment that seeks to engender reforms in the social and moral order. Opinion entrepreneurs mostly lead the argument; others pick up the beat, and for various reasons. The hope of Nigerians standing up to the power and influence that pastors have accrued, to challenging them to some level of accountability in their dealings is, for now, largely tied to the irreverent activities of opinion entrepreneurs. Not only do opinion entrepreneurs frequently challenge pastors, but politicians too have also faced a similar level of scrutiny. One cannot divorce the criticisms of pastors’ deficiencies in moral and financial accountability from similar demands made of elected political leaders. Like many regular activities, “political activities on the internet are embedded in larger social processes, and the Internet itself is only one element of an ecology of media. The Internet does not create an entirely new political order; to the contrary, to understand its role requires that we understand much else about the social processes that surround it.”⁴⁴

The sensibility that propelled *Free the Sheeple* partly owes to a political awakening by people let down by their moral and political leaders and who have found a conducive space to take on these issues. It is hard to say one propelled the other – whether criticisms of politicians and their corrupt handling of the nation’s financial resources launched a sentiment that transferred to pastors or the other way round – but the ways Nigerians use social media to mobilize against their religious leaders is not in isolation of their resistance practices against their political leaders. This does not mean that changes to policy have been automatic because of the power of social media. In reality, democratic practices also still require analog modes of communication to drive

⁴⁴ Agre, “Real-Time Politics.” Also see Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere.”

policies.⁴⁵ However, Nigerian leaders now know to watch the social media conversation to check the pulse of the public on their policies. The Internet medium is becoming an arena where the cogitations that congeal into public opinions are spawned, the space where the “engine of deliberation . . . generates and exports deliberative habits to other settings of political decision making.”⁴⁶

As the political uses of social media gain traction, elected and appointed leaders get just as jittery as pastors that their legitimizing traditions are being threatened by the irreverence the Internet enables. Nigeria has tried – and is still trying – to propound harsh laws and regulations that will curtail social media activities such as sharing false information, and attacks that can cause disaffection for the state.⁴⁷ Those laws are ostensibly to reduce the rate at which people dispense fake news and use social media for the mischief that folds over into social relationality, but they also fear the radical potentials the lack of regulation of the Internet promotes. To curtail revolutionary ideas, the government breeds its own troll farms⁴⁸ and even some churches use their media department to forcefully push back against the contempt that social media fosters against authority figures. Such responses are understandable if one considers that what is at stake for religion and political authorities – power and material and symbolic rewards – is too much for anyone to passively cede spaces to online activists. This cynical manipulation of democratic ethos that allows everyone the freedom of – and space for – self-expression is a strategic countermeasure that helps sustain power through the introduction of chaos into the internet sphere. Piling on commentary using trolls can contain the spirit of the revolution because people get eventually overwhelmed with opinion overload and either withdraw entirely or retreat to corners of the Internet where people deal with issues that do not require much emotional processing.

There is some irony to the challenge of the pastors, though. While much of the criticism began with pastors’ acquiring excessive power

⁴⁵ Rasmussen, “Internet and the Political Public Sphere.”

⁴⁶ Evans, “Who Wants a Deliberative Public Sphere?”

⁴⁷ www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35005137. Kazeem, “Nigeria’s Lawmakers Are About to Pass a Bill Which Could Gag Citizens on Social Media”; Adegoke, “Nigeria’s ‘Frivolous’ Anti-Social Media Bill Just Won’t Go Away”; Iroanusi, “Nigerian Senate Reintroduces Bill to Regulate Social Media Use.”

⁴⁸ Journalist and professor Farooq Kperogi, also classifiable as an opinion entrepreneur, uncovered the presidency’s troll farm in the early days of the Buhari administration: www.farooqkperogi.com/2020_01_02_archive.html

without a matching level of accountability, the best-known social media creators who attack these attitudes eventually professionalize their own campaigns too. To maintain a certain level of aesthetic appeal for their opinion production, particularly for those who run blogs and channels, and considering that pushing out opinions is a job (so to speak), they get to the point where they need financial resources to keep going. Some generate this through ad revenue. But to get to the stage where their content makes money, they have to build up their clout and generate traffic even if that effort entails being controversial and disrespectful for its own sake. Apart from ad revenue, one blogger who consistently criticizes pastors lists pullover hoodies on her channel for sale. The prices range from \$25 to \$40. When one clicks on the link she shared, it redirects from the YouTube channel to an online store where the hoodies have texts such as “Blind no more,” “Na so we go dey dey?” (which is pidgin for “is this how things will continue?”) and “God dey weep for us” (“God is crying for us”). To each of the store pages have also been appended notes such as, “More and more people are no Longer blind to the deceptions and lies of false prophets and fake pastors who steal in the name of the Lord,” “Sometimes when we look at the situation of Nigeria we can’t help but wonder whether no say we go dey dey? will there ever be a change?” and “With the present state of things right now . . . God must be looking down and weeping for us.”⁴⁹ These displays of merch and commoditization of radical content tempers the excitement that the Internet is “the site and subject of liberal democratic practice” especially because such enhancement of capitalism over the purported ideals of democratic freedoms can lead the public to become cynical of all motives.⁵⁰

In the interviews I have had with several partakers in these social commentaries, some were quite dismissive of Daddy Freeze and other social media critics. They saw them as clout chasers and even demonic agents who should be resisted with weapons of spiritual warfare. “It is an attack of the devil on the church,” some reasoned. “This is a satanic attack on the body of Christ, and we must be vigilant.” To this set of people, the whole crisis was a demonic conspiracy, and that was all there was to it for them. They would not throw their pastors to the

⁴⁹ https://teespring.com/blind-no-more?cross_sell=true&cross_sell_format=no_ne&count_cross_sell_products_shown=3&pid=212&cid=5839

⁵⁰ Dean, “Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere.”

wolves of public culture to gnaw on, because it would make the church vulnerable. Whatever flaws pastors might have, they still represent a religious constituency in a political culture where such a high-profile representation can ward off one's social erasure and the constant threat of violence. They would rather God deal with His pastors rather than an online crowd. In such a culture where people remain resolute in their support for their religious leaders, for *Free the Sheeple* to have gained ground at all is interesting. According to Daddy Freeze, his campaign's success could only be because the Holy Spirit inspired and fueled the moment. While this answer represents a spiritual perspective, a more material one is that the disaffection against corruption and public leaders' liberalism with finances peaked and resulted in those outbursts. However, if the whole of Nigerian Christianity is not up in arms against the pastors, it is also because the churches remain about the only spot in the country where there is a discernable link between the money people give as tithes and offerings, and the edifices and infrastructure that spring up.

In many of the discussions that I had with Pentecostals over Daddy Freeze, the pastors' supporters would point to the efficacy of churches – the many people they had supported and mentored, the various enterprises they had built and which were functioning effectively, their acts of charity, the church buildings they were putting up, and even the public roads leading to their churches – and use that to challenge the idea that pastors deserved the antagonism of *Free the Sheeple*.⁵¹ For instance, Nigerians live in a country where they are subject to multiple taxes that are indiscriminately introduced by various levels of government but, for the most part, they do not see the results in public infrastructure or any other aspect of public life. When they pay tithes and give different offerings, they see results in the modern structures that churches put up. As someone remarked in one of my conversations with her, “Pastors are not the ones who ruined Nigeria!” Many Pentecostals see their pastors as prudent managers of resources in a way that their elected leaders are not, and it is therefore no surprise that their impulse for radicalism is tempered. That is part of the

⁵¹ The successes by the church range from their intervention services in areas such as education, finances, security, social services, and even infrastructure such as motorable roads. For some of the examples of their social activities, see: Ade-rufus, “Why Should We Praise Him?”

dynamics of how the power identities of their leaders are sustained with the acquiescence of their followers.

When Daddy Freeze said "it is working" is no doctrine, he overlooked a crucial detail in how the Nigerian public, forever imperiled by dysfunctional administrations and processes, have come to appreciate the activities of pastors in the Nigerian social terrain. The Pentecostal doctrine in Nigeria is calibrated on demonstrable proof of "it is working" or at least, "it works for me" rather than hardcore theology. The fact that pastors, as the shepherds of the movement, have been successful in the areas where the government has failed means that churches are seen as development agencies.⁵² They have become a constituency around which the power identity of ordinary congregants is anchored and, therefore, must be protected from collapse. If it goes down, an ethical vision of Nigeria's modernity – along with the notions of empowerment many congregants derive from their belonging to a faith movement like Pentecostalism – will crumble too. Technology might have empowered people to take on their leaders and challenge religious authority to reform their theological ideas in the face of new realities, but the infrastructure itself is not enough to dislodge the construct of religion outright. That is why, as I observed, people's demands for change from pastors are radically expressed in their social media activities and internet use, but they are ultimately oriented toward change and internal reforms rather than total destruction of Pentecostal pillars.

Some others were far less conservative in their reasoning of why *Free the Sheeple* gained traction though. They said even though their personal pastors were attacked in those debates, they still supported Daddy Freeze's arguments. Their sentiments were based on what they perceive as an overdue need for reformation in the church and in the polity. They thought the church must set the standards for the society, and the necessary agitation that will make such changes happen should not be outsourced to non-Christians. They compared *Free the Sheeple* with other reforms in church history, and said without someone standing up to powerful leaders, there would be no progress in religion. While they remain convinced that God called their pastors, they also believe that pastors are humans who could lose their way due to the corrupting influences of the world. When that happens, even pastors need God to restore them to righteousness. In that case, they reasoned,

⁵² Wariboko, "Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa."

Daddy Freeze's *Free the Sheeple* could, in fact, be God intervening to correct whatever was wrong with his church. To these Pentecostals, all the furor was not mere happenstance, it was God sanitizing his church as he did many times in the Bible. They even referred to Martin Luther and the church reformation movement in Western history to buttress their point that such debates are important for such progress. The allusion to the Lutheran reformation is quite apposite, considering the role that a new form of media technology, the printing press, played in upturning religious authority of the day.

While they were equally critical of pastors, they were not going to give up on Christianity because some aspects of their faith practices were flawed. They held on to their conviction in the inherent efficacy of the Pentecostal truth, and they were quite clear that they were not interested in seeing the church they have invested their lives and labor in collapse. Instead, they want to set the terms and conditions by which they can continue to be Christians in the modern world. They also want to raise their children without being encumbered by suffocating orthodoxy and promises empty(ied) of meaning. So, they would remain in the faith and reform it according to progressive ideologies rather than yield to the seduction of secularism. As someone said to me while talking about the imperative of pastoral accountability, "Pastors are human, and they too can fall off just like anyone of us. It is important to remind them that God called them for us his children, and not the other way around." It is about disciplining and curtailing the expression of power identity lest it becomes errant and monstrous in its exercises of the self.