



PRISON SERVICE  
**JOURNAL**

September 2021 No 256

# Religion, Social media and the discourse on prisons: An analysis of the responses to the Church of Pentecost (CoP) prison project in Ghana

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## Introduction

**The main goal of this paper is to analyse how social media discourses refurbished the debate that religion and development are irreconcilable and also misconceptions about prisoners. It is also to demonstrate how the Church of Pentecost (CoP) is breaking binaries between religion and development through its prison projects to contribute to the socio-economic development of Ghana. The CoP, as part of its five-year vision, dubbed, 'Possessing the Nations', is contributing to building prison facilities to help in decongesting Ghana's prisons. Since the 1980s, the implementation of neoliberal policies, collectively labelled as Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, compelled the state of Ghana to decentralise development.<sup>1</sup> The impact of the SAPs compelled the regime of Ghana's erstwhile military leader, Jerry John Rawlings, to adopt a decentralised approach to development. His strategy led to the invitation of faith-based organisations, civil societies, and traditional authorities to participate in the country's socio-economic development.<sup>2</sup> In response to Rawlings' call, many religious organisations, including the CoP, have positioned themselves as key actors in Ghana's quest for economic and social transformation.**

I have identified two main factors that have partly accounted for the CoP recasting its image as a key actor in the socio-economic development of Ghana. The first was the re-democratisation of Ghana since 1992. Until 1992, as I have indicated, Ghana was ruled by a military leader who focused on a state-centric approach to development. This was primarily because religion,

particularly Christianity and traditional authorities, were considered anti-revolutionary. But the narrative changed when the economic recession in the 1980s compelled Rawlings to incorporate faith-based organisations and traditional authorities into the development grid. The second reason is the increasing growth of the humanist groups that have been criticising religions in Ghana for their unproductiveness in meeting Ghana's developmental needs. Since the last five years, one such group — the Common-sense Family, founded by Avraham Ben Moshe — has intensified the crusade against religion — particularly Christianity in the country. The main argument of these humanist groups is that religions in Ghana — which is confessed by about 90 percent of the country's population<sup>3</sup> — have not been supportive of Ghana's development.

Partly in response to the perceived failure of religion to support Ghana's socio-economic development, most religious groups have embarked on robust social services. The CoP, which is the largest Pentecostal denomination in Ghana,<sup>4</sup> has also sought to position itself as one of the key actors of Ghana's socio-economic development. Consequently, as part of his five-year term vision (known as Vision 2023), Apostle Eric Kwabena Nyamekye, the current chairman of the CoP, is partnering with the state to embark on some social services. The vision is dubbed 'Possessing the nations: Equipping the church to transform every sphere of society with values and principles of the Kingdom of God'. The church seeks collaboration with the Ghana Prisons Service to initiate the construction of (cells) for selected prisons in the country, to ease congestions in those prisons."<sup>5</sup> The prison project is based on the poor state of prisons and the despising of ex-convicts in Ghana. There is a paucity of empirical

1. Giles Mohan, "Adjustment and decentralization in Ghana: a case of diminished sovereignty," *Political Geography*, Vol. 15, no. 1 (1996), p. 81.

2. Ho-Won Jeong, "Liberal economic reform in Ghana: A contested political agenda," *Africa Today*, Vol. 42, no. 4 (4th Qtr., 1995), p. 97.

3. Ghana Statistical Service (2010). *2010 Population Census*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.

4. Amos Jimmy Markins (2019). *Transmitting the spirit in missions: The history and growth of the Church of Pentecost*. Eugene/Oregon: Wipf & Stock, p.1.

research on the perceptions of Ghanaians about prisons. But in an interview with Justice Tankebe, a Ghanaian professor of Criminology at the University of Cambridge, he stated that most Ghanaians see prisoners as incorrigible. He maintained that the criminal justice system in Ghana is poor, as it imprisons petty thieves. This is because the country relies heavily on imprisonment as the primary form of social control. He noted that the prisons are also not in good shape to contribute to reforming inmates.<sup>6</sup> It has been observed that Ghana's criminal justice system is faced with challenges, such as corruption and high cost of legal services. This contributes to prison overcrowding and recidivism rates.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the CoP's initiative which has been endorsed by the government and other stakeholders has suffered a backlash and mixed responses from church members and the general Ghanaian community. Social media, specifically Facebook, has been the main avenue for the expression of dissent and support for the project. The content of most of the critiques against the CoP's prison project is that the church should stay clear of projects that belong to the state. I argue that the critiques refurbish and rehabilitate the old debate that religion and politics are irreconcilable. I also argue that while religion percolates most aspects of life in Ghana — and usually expressing visibility in state functions — many Ghanaians who took to social media to comment on the CoP's prison project assumed that the church was stepping beyond its boundaries. In this sense, most of the commentators maintained that the CoP should concern itself with the spiritual nourishment of its members and other forms of development and allow the state to take care of prisons. But it is a simple argument to draw a neat demarcation between what the church can or cannot do, based on Ghana's developmental challenges.

Nonetheless, given the responses from the public, it is important to understand the debate that has been built around the complex interactions between religion and development. It is also important to explore how social media contributed to rehashing the perceived

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binaries between religion and development. The question is asked: can religious groups engineer development in Ghana? Consequently, I spend the next section discussing the place of social media in broadening the scope of 'freedom of expression in Ghana', which is considered one of the foundations of liberal democracy. The next section analyses the contents of public Facebook comments, as well as the views of some key respondents on the CoP's prison project. But in all of this, my argument is that the church is deconstructing binaries between religion and development, sacred and secular, and religion and politics as it rationalises its prison project.

Methodologically, I conducted a year's ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana on the CoP and development. I purposely selected and interviewed 10 youth in Accra and church officials who are directly involved with the CoP's prison project. Also, because the CoP has a public Facebook account for publicising its activities, I used purposive sampling to track the public responses to the church's prison projects for about a month. Using the snowball approach, I identified two ex-convicts who preach in commercial mini-buses (labelled as trotro) who helped me to identify a few other ex-convicts in Accra. Their participation in the research was voluntary. To protect the integrity of my respondents, including Facebook commentators (apart from key respondents), I anonymise them when I cite them in the paper. Given that I did not find any empirical work on the perception of Ghanaians about prisoners, I interviewed two Ghanaian criminologists and prison officers to support the paper.

### **Social media and popular discourses on CoP's prison project.**

In reframing the debate over religion and development with particular reference to CoP's prison project, social media has been very instrumental. Most members of the church, as well as non-members, deployed social media to articulate their disagreement with the CoP's prison project or register their support

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5. CoP (2019). Vision 2023: Five-year document for The Church of Pentecost covering the period 2018-203 – Possessing the Nations. Accra: Pentecost Press Ltd., p. 62.  
 6. Interview with Dr Justice Tankebe on April 27, 2020.  
 7. Joseph Appiahene-Gyamfi, "Alternatives to imprisonment in Ghana: A focus on Ghana's criminal justice system," PhD thesis submitted to Simon Fraser University, 1995.

for the project. In this section, I argue that social media, alongside the traditional media,<sup>8</sup> has become an important means of broadening the opportunities available to most of the youth in Ghana to contribute to public discussions. Some Ghanaians are taking advantage of social media to forge their own identities and agenda. Social media gives universal access to Ghanaians who have access to the internet to contribute to reshaping public discourses on topical issues. In many countries in Africa, many of the youth are embracing technology and digital platforms as spaces to challenge political dictatorship in their respective countries.<sup>9</sup> This is because political party organisation that favours people with wealth has limited the access most of the unemployed youth have to contribute to public discourses and policy formulation.<sup>10</sup> The youths unequal access to power is also due to the gerontocratic nature of the political regime in Africa.<sup>11</sup> Social media has enabled the youth in Africa to negotiate their place and space with patterns of authority and control.<sup>12</sup> The preponderance of social media also implies that some of the youth deploy it to engage in spreading fake news, conspiracies, and political mudslinging. In Ghana, like other African countries, many Pentecostal churches have innovatively used social media to engage in robust evangelism. It is argued that through the internet, converts into Pentecostal Christianity are made without the convert having physical contact with the religious clergy and establishing contact with physical religious service.<sup>13</sup> The CoP has registered itself on social media for more than a decade. Through social media, the church engages in cyber-evangelism and communicates its activities. With

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a prison project as a novel religious project in Ghana, the CoP's Facebook account became one of the handles that church used to announce its prison projects.

The CoP, as part of its Vision 2023, is partnering with the government of Ghana to build prison facilities for the state. This is to help decongest the prisons and also contribute to reforming prisoners for social living.<sup>14</sup> In pursuing this vision, the CoP has cut the sod for the construction of a holding facility for prisoners in Damongo, in the Savanna Region capital. The facility is expected to house about 350 inmates. It will comprise two dormitories, each housing 150 inmates. On July 21, 2019, the chairman of the CoP cut another sod for work to begin on the construction of a new facility the Nsawam Medium Security Prison. It will accommodate 300 inmates. The prison facilities will have workshops that will train the inmates, as well as a church, recreational centre, and an administration block for officers of the Prison Service.<sup>15</sup> The church is also building an ultra-modern holding facility for the Ghana Prison Service in Obuasi and Ejura in the Ashanti Region, Hawia in the Western Region, and Kenyasi in the Brong Ahafo Region.<sup>16</sup> The CoP deployed its presence on social media to announce this grand and unprecedented project. In response, there were dissents and approval that were expressed by church members and the Ghanaian public, largely through Facebook. I gathered the following responses to the publication of the project on Facebook on November 1, 2019

Akua responded that, 'Stupidity will kill our church leaders, because they eat free, sleep free, drive free, best schools for their children, free hospital, free medication, and they have everything for free. That is

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8. Felicitas Becker & Joel Cabrita (2018), 'Introduction' in Felicitas Becker & Joel Cabrita (2018), *Religion, media, and marginality in modern Africa*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, p. 2.
  9. Nanjala Nyabola (2018). *Digital democracy, analogue politics: How the internet era is transforming politics in Kenya*. London: Zed Books Ltd, p. xviii.
  10. George M. Bob-Milliar, "Party Youth Activists and Low-Intensity Electoral Violence in Ghana: A Qualitative Study of Party Foot Soldiers". *African Studies Quarterly*, 15(1) (2014): 125-152.
  11. Adebayo, Joseph Olusegun, "Gerontocracy in African politics: youth and the quest for political participation". *Journal of African Elections*. 17 (1) (2018): 140-161.
  12. Akin Iwilade, "Crisis as opportunity: Youth, social media and the renegotiation of power in Africa," *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16(8), 2014, pp. 1054-108.
  13. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Get on the internet!' Says the Lord: Religion, cyberspace and Christianity in contemporary Africa," *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 13, no. 2 (2007), pp. 225-242.
  14. CoP (2019). Vision 2023: Five-year document for The Church of Pentecost covering the period 2018-203 – Possessing the Nations. Accra: Pentecost Press Ltd., p. 62.
  15. Zion Abdul-Rauf (Class FM Online), "SR: Church of Pentecost to build 350-capacity prison in Damongo," <https://www.classfonline.com/news/general/SR-Church-of-Pentecost-to-build-350-capacity-prison-in-Damongo-10462>; Accessed: January 29, 2020; Pentecost News (July 23, 2019), "Chairman cuts sod for the commencement of Nsawam Camp Prisons Project," <https://thecophq.org/news/chairman-cuts-sod-for-commencement-of-nsawam-camp-prisons-project/>; Accessed: January 29, 2020.
  16. Graphic.com.gh (September 22 2019), "Church of Pentecost constructing 5 prisons," <https://theindependentghana.com/2019/09/church-of-pentecost-constructing-5-prisons/>; Accessed: February 9, 2020.

why they are building police station and prisons, the next one is going to be shooting range.'

Another gentleman, whom I refer to as John, criticised the church as follows:

*Nonsense, why the building of prisons but not factories as there is a lack of work in the country whilst government officials use government money to enrich themselves. Did you think before coming out to say this thing, do you know the number of Pentecost Church members that can't reach at the end of the month with their salaries but they fulfil their obligations as church members? The church is losing it.*

Kofi who identifies as a member of the CoP, corroborated John by claiming, 'what you are saying is very true, most of the members are in the church and don't have a job but they manage to give an offering every time they attend church. If this factory is built these members can be employed even if GH500 per month as salary is fine.' The idea that the CoP could have rather built factories was supported by Dr Caleb Nyanni, a Pentecostal pastor of Elim Pentecostal church in the UK (the sister church of the CoP), a lecturer at the CoP's Bible College — Birmingham Christian College in the UK, and son of the immediate past chairman of the CoP, Apostle Prof. Opoku Onyinah. He asked whether the CoP by building prisons was seeking to encourage crime. He maintained that the church should focus on reforming prisoners, instead.<sup>17</sup> Rev. Dr. Johnson Afrane-Twum, also a Pentecostal pastor who runs a transnational church service in Ghana and the UK and provides pastoral counselling at the Birmingham University College, said that it is not the duty of the CoP to build prisons. He was convinced that the church was transgressing and deviating from its core mandate of preaching the salvation message.<sup>18</sup> These responses reinforce the assumption that religion and development should be separated.

In response to this division, a church member wrote, 'I don't blame you, John. It is because of the hardship in Africa. We think every generous act should directly end up giving someone a job. We need generational thinkers, not those who are only conscious of today because of their stomach. If more prisons are built, are we not creating jobs for masons, carpenters, tilers, and prisoners?' The church leader responsible for the project said that people are attacking the project because of their ignorance of the prison and criminal system, as well as politicisation of all social issues, in Ghana.<sup>19</sup>

The Ghana Prison Service, the main beneficiaries of the project also responded. Superintendent Courage Atsem, who is also the Public Relations Officer for the GP, appealed to the congestion of prisons in Ghana and Hebrews 13:3, which reads: 'Remember those in prison, as though you were in the prison with them; and also, those mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies,' to applaud the CoP for its prison project.

Given the mixed responses that the announcement of the CoP's prison project generated, on December 3, 2019, when the chairman of CoP, Apostle Nyamekye, met with ministers and officers of the Kasoa Area of the church in the Central Region of Ghana, he waded into the debate by adding to the benefits of the prisons as follows:

We need generational thinkers, not those who are only conscious of today because of their stomach. If more prisons are built, are we not creating jobs for masons, carpenters, tilers, and prisoners?'

*The Nsawam Medium Security Prison, I am told was built for 800 inmates, but currently houses close to 3500 inmates. That is an excess of about 2700 inmates! If as a church, we can put up very big and magnificent auditoriums, which we only use on Sunday mornings and in the evenings, and look on unconcerned as our brothers and sisters struggle to find a place to lay their heads then what kind of followers of Jesus Christ are we?<sup>20</sup>*

Following the responses of the CoP prison project generated, it is clear that the public was either ill-

17. Personal communication with Ps. Dr Caleb Nyanni on February 7, 2020.

18. Personal communication with Rev. Dr. Johnson Afrani-Twum, February 6, 2020.

19. Personal communication with Ps. James Agyin on May 5, 2020.

20. Starrfm.com.gh (Dec. 7, 2019), "Our prison project is aimed at decongestion, not encouraging criminals – Church of Pentecost, "https://theindependentghana.com/2019/12/our-prison-project-is-aimed-at-decongestion-not-encouraging-criminals-church-of-pentecost/; Accessed: February 9, 2020.

informed about the type of prisons the church was constructing or had a different priority. This is because the church has a vision of constructing modern prisons that will perform the core function of reforming and economically empowering prison inmates. Consequently, the prisons are to have chapels and well-stocked workshops. As Eric Nyamekye, the chairman of the CoP, indicated the chapels will enable the church to reach out to inmates with the gospel of salvation, while the workshops will enable inmates to receive vocational training so that, upon discharge, they can become responsible, productive and law-abiding citizens who can also contribute to national development. James T. Tetteh, an apostle of the CoP, who is also Assistant Director of Prison Service, added that the prisons have been strategically located in areas that have two farming seasons in a year. The church will, therefore, redirect the energies of able-bodied inmates to cultivate crops that could boost Ghana's quest for food security and sovereignty. He also indicated that the prison project of the CoP is necessary because, apart from Nsawam Medium Security Prison and Ankaful Maxim Security Prison that were built as modern prisons, all the others were either slave castles/dungeons or storehouses that are not fit for human beings.<sup>21</sup> As to whether the CoP's project will be encouraging prisoners, he responded that the church was only going to outsource prisoners from existing prisons, not directly from the court.

It could be gleaned from the mixed responses that many assumed that it is only 'abominable' crimes that take people to prison. As part of writing this paper, I interacted with an ex-convict (whom I anonymise as Kwao) who said that the prison is a contraction of 'People's Rejection In a Society Of Nations.' According to him, this expression represents the situation of persons who have been neglected and often subjected to poor and inhuman treatment in prisons. Most of the Facebook respondents also disdain prisoners because they consider them to be people who are incorrigibly evil and unfit for society. In an interview with Abena, a student at the African University College of Communications, Accra, she confirmed this when she said that, 'why should the church spend money on people who are evil and not fit for society?' For people

like Abena, they assume that prisoners cannot reform to fit into society. They also assume that prisoners have a genetic predisposition to crime and must be caged. This stigmatisation shapes public discourses on prisons. It does not leave room for prisoners to be reformed to participate in building society. This also reflects on how the state treats prisoners. The overcrowding of prisons in Ghana predisposes inmates to all forms of infectious diseases.

The prejudices against prisoners also assume that society cannot tolerate ex-convicts, who desire to reintegrate into society. Some of these ex-convicts, therefore, take to doing works that they know will enhance their self-esteem. For example, a few of the ex-convicts I interviewed for this paper have taken to

freelance preaching in buses or at the public square, usually markets one of them, whom I refer to as Yaw, preaches in commercial buses (known locally as Trotro) that run within Accra. During their preaching, they deploy their prison experiences and their 'criminal' activities in the past as a direct contrast to how they have been saved by Jesus Christ to preach the gospel. In the Ghanaian society that celebrates religious conversion as converts rupturing with their past,<sup>22</sup> the conversion narratives of ex-convicts give them legitimacy to evangelise. The preaching helps them to achieve the objectives of reintegrating in

society that will hardly employ them to work and also earn a living.

The conversation also bordered on the lines of demarcation between religion and development. The concerns that the CoP should concentrate on building factories and not prisons assumes that there is a line of demarcation between what the church can do and cannot do. This configuration of religion and development resonates with the debate in the 1960s that demanded the separation between religion and development. The broad base of human life was compartmentalised into two spheres: the sacred and the secular. Religion was to occupy the sacred sphere (which was private) while politics was to occupy the secular sphere (which was public). Religion was considered 'irrational' and anti-progress and should be left to survive as an individual private affair. Politics was rather considered to operate on rationality and

... 'why should the church spend money on people who are evil and not fit for society?' For people like Abena, they assume that prisoners cannot reform to fit into society.

21. Personal communication with Apostle James T. Tetteh on February 7, 2020.

22. Birgit Meyer, "'Make a complete break with the past.' Memory and post-colonial modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostal discourse," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28(3) (1998), 316-349.

modernity and should be allowed to exist in the public sphere. That religious beliefs were 'irrational' and should be relegated to the private sphere had implications for the idea of development. Development was considered to hinge on rationality, logicity, and the will to challenge the status to bring about progress and improvement in the lives of people. Since religion was said to be conservative and less inclined to change, its role in the provision of social services was considered tenuous. In the same way, development was conceived as modernization — which is a radical break with the past. This radical break with the past implied challenging the status quo and conventions and questioning received 'wisdom'. Religion was considered incapable of breaking away with the status quo and challenging its convention. The disdain against religion in the public sphere was such that development literature and development practices avoided the discussion on religion as religion was considered a taboo.<sup>23</sup> It was taken for granted that one could not be modern without throwing off religious yoke.<sup>24</sup> The responses also seek to limit the activities of the CoP to prioritising evangelism as primary responsibility with all others as secondary. This, however, contradicts the church's vision 2023. The church's building of prisons is part of bridging the boundaries between the 'religion' and 'development'. Through the bridging of this gap,

the CoP is positioning itself as a key actor in Ghana's development. It is also resolving a social challenge that renders life difficult to prisoners and ex-convicts.

### Conclusion

It could be concluded that the CoP's prison project the religion or development binaries. The church is seeking to provide a holistic mission that incorporates what is generally considered mundane, such as the building of prisons, into its repertoire of activities. Through this, the CoP is strategically and innovatively repositioning itself as a key actor in meeting Ghana's socio-economic development. There is a lot of research on the challenges facing prisons in Ghana.<sup>25</sup> Over the years, the state-centric approach to development has not significantly helped in the course of Ghana's development. As I indicated, the debilitating effect of the SAPs compelled the political elite to extend an invitation to faith-based organisations, traditional authorities, and civil societies to participate in Ghana's quest for development. In this respect, the CoP's prison project should be read as part of the church's efforts at helping the state deal with a challenge that undermines the lives of a section of its citizens. But more importantly, the CoP could work on its communication strategies to mobilise support for its activities.

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23. Kurt Alan Ver Beek, "Spirituality: A development taboo," *Development in Practice*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2000), pp. 31-43.

24. John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge (2009). *God is back: How the global rise of faith is changing the world*. London: Penguin Books, p. 10.

25. For a comprehensive report see: Amnesty International (2012). "Prisoners are bottom of the pile": Human Rights of inmates in Ghana. London: Amnesty International.