




False hope religion? Socio-economic turmoil and the rise of prosperity gospel in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The socio-economic and political meltdown in Zimbabwe that began in the year 2000 caused significant changes in how people related to religion. Zimbabwe has endured one of the world's most puzzling economic catastrophes, characterised by extreme unpredictability and instability. Since the year 2000, Zimbabwe's socio-economic landscape has changed dramatically following the introduction of radical economic policies such as land redistribution and indigenisation. Since then, the economic fortunes of Zimbabwe have nosedived, with economic convulsions and unpredictability becoming the norm. This peculiar period of the country's history has also seen far-reaching changes in the religious sector as prosperity gospel has risen to become probably the most influential religious force in the country. This paper documents how, in the face of socio-economic challenges, Zimbabweans have sought solace in charismatic churches championing prosperity. It argues that the uncertainties triggered by collapsing social and economic fabric have led to the rise of a charismatic prosperity gospel movement in Zimbabwe. Its growth has been aided by a 'spiritual healing' infrastructure that supports believers in various ways.

Keywords: Beliefs, church, economy, religion, prosperity gospel, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The literature shows that, in times of crisis, human beings tend to look for solutions from beyond the known. When what is known fails to address people's existential questions and needs, it makes sense to look elsewhere. Even those who question the very existence of any realise the fallibility and limitations of human nature, which means there has to be a higher power outside of what is seen and touched (Rahman et al., 2020). Not only do people realise this power, but they also begin to doubt the 'normal' or the usual way of doing things. At this stage, they are likely to seek something different, unique and new. In the case of religion, the orthodox ways of worship became inadequate, unfulfilling, and indifferent to their crises and needs. Hence, the attraction to new religious movements that seemingly address most needs posed by a crisis or shock experienced in people's lives. This paper explores the role of religion and spirituality in Zimbabwe in a time of extreme economic meltdown by focusing on



charismatic Pentecostal churches (aka ministries). In particular, the focus is on the rise and prominence of prosperity gospel movements in the urban areas of Zimbabwe.

This paper is therefore concerned with the correlation between a particular religious upsurge and the socio-economic environment in Zimbabwe's urban centres. The relationship between socio-economic decline and the 'mushrooming' of prosperity churches in Zimbabwe's urban centres is examined. For instance, in cities like Bulawayo, Pentecostal churches are ubiquitous, often occupying spaces such as warehouses left vacant by collapsed businesses in the city's industrial areas and turning them into worship spaces. Religion is used as "the opium of the people" (Marx & Engels, 1964:43) and as a framework to support our contention that the rise of charismatic churches correlates with people seeking solace in times of need. We argue that Pentecostal churches make sense to the masses confronted with difficult questions and challenging times. From the discussion, we conclude that the emergence of Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches is a 'frenzied religious tsunami', which gives false hope to suffering people and offers them temporary solutions at best. We make our case by conducting a desktop study, collecting data from a review of the literature and newspaper articles on prominent charismatic preachers. Moreover, data from television broadcasts from both national and international channels were collected and analysed. Further, we draw from the experiences and observations of three authors who have lived in Zimbabwe and participated in Pentecostal church services.

Enduring socio-economic problems in Zimbabwe

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, most African countries have generally experienced economic depression and unfavourable conditions. As the prevailing neo-liberal environment has heightened competition globally, de-industrialisation has negatively impacted livelihoods in African countries, where economies are much less diversified than in developed countries (Gatwiri et al., 2020). With the resultant economic challenges came disease and socio-cultural degradation. For people in Zimbabwe, especially the urbanites, such challenges have become a part of everyday life. Their country has been in economic 'intensive care' characterised by socio-economic unrest since it introduced radical economic policy changes, such as the land reform programme, in 2000. According to Richardson (2005), by 2003, the economy was the fastest shrinking in the world at 18% per year. In addition, inflation was running at 500%, and the Zimbabwe dollar lost 99% of its real exchange value. The destabilised economy resulted in massive de-industrialisation, with thousands of companies failing to cope with the comatose economy. The country also experienced a rapid decline in the performance of the industrial sector, resulting in most industries shutting down, triggering massive retrenchments and joblessness. For instance, 700 companies had closed by 2001 as industrial production fell by 10.5% and 17.5% in 2002 (Richardson, 2005). Efforts to turn the economy around in a troubled political space with longitudinal sanctions (Grebe, 2010) are undermined by corruption, mismanagement, and skyrocketing unemployment, which continue to affect livelihoods as the informal sector becomes the only source of hope for many Zimbabweans.

During the first decade of the crisis, the job market dwindled to the extent that some surveys pegged the unemployment rate as high as 90% (Sibanda, 2010). Although the government has consistently denied that the unemployment rate is higher today than before 2000, it is evident that many citizens are unemployed and struggling to feed their families. The difficulties of formal employment have given rise to entrepreneurship, culminating in the informal sector's accelerated growth. However, access to capital has hindered many would-be entrepreneurs because they cannot finance their businesses as the financial sector treads cautiously under the depressed economic atmosphere. Surviving outside of formal markets within an environment of high unemployment has exposed many to extreme suffering. Survival options have become minimal as even those employed must endure the hardships of hyperinflation that erodes their earnings. Demand for payment in the United States dollar by businesses and service providers has exacerbated the dire situation for a workforce paid in the local currency.



In this unstable environment, many have left the country and migrated elsewhere in search of better livelihoods. According to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM, 2008), by the beginning of 2008, 37.8% of the population had migrated elsewhere. The exact figures of emigrants are unknown due to the central characteristics of Zimbabwean migration, namely its circularity and irregularity (IOM, 2008: 36). It is, however, widely recognised that most people migrated to neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique and Zambia.

In 2009, rising inflation forced the government to discard the local currency for a multi-currency regime backed by the United States dollar. However, all these efforts failed to turn the economy around, leading to the introduction of 'bond notes' – a surrogate currency (Mhlanga, 2021:94). Munangagwa (2009) contends that the economic decline of Zimbabwe was mainly caused by poor monetary policies and failure of fiscal policies to control the budget deficit. Although there was a reprieve with the formation of a government of national unity (GNU) in 2009, which lasted up to 2013, the dreaded bleeding economy has reappeared recently with devastating effects. In May 2020, the annual inflation stood at approximately 800%, with further prospects of rising. Those who chose not to emigrate had to find new ways of coping with the economic meltdown.

It has been noted that, in the face of national socio-economic upheaval, religion can play a bridging role between the spiritual and social phases (Clifford, 1969). It can be argued that due to the rise in socio-economic problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and illness, individuals get unsettled and desperate, leading them to join religious movements, especially those of the charismatic type. Zimbabwe's economy has been in free fall for over two decades, and people have searched in vain for answers. Instead, social trauma has risen due to high poverty levels, unemployment, disease afflictions, political disharmony, social tensions, hatred and isolation. Poverty, in particular, has been identified as a cause of many other complex challenges. Mylek and Nel (2010) assert that poverty is one of the world's biggest challenges. It leads to levels of desperation so high that any suggestion is taken as a solution. Hence, when poverty is linked to spirituality and bad omens, people seek rituals to cleanse themselves. Casting out of evil spirits and other solutions offered by charismatic prosperity gospel movements thus fill the vacuum that people experience. Miracles become a panacea for believers as they flock to where they are performed.

Perspectives on Religion

Contrary to predictions that religion would slowly die away in Southern Africa (Rakodi, 2012), religion and spirituality have become even more central to the lives of millions in the global South than ever before (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2005; Willis, 2013). From time immemorial, defining religion has been so complex that conversations around the phenomenon have yielded less scholarly agreement than any other matter studied (Mokotso & Ntombana, 2018). Scholars from various disciplines differ in their definition and articulation of what constitutes a religion. That is why there is no universal approach to the study of religion as a science. What comes out of these scholarly efforts, however, is the recognition that religion emerges from shared experience in society and offers explanations that transcend whatever mundane factual knowledge is available (Oluwatobi, 2020:2). For the purposes of this study, we draw on scholarship that recognises that, during difficulties and struggles, people are likely to seek answers from the sacred. Karl Marx views religion as not only a reflection of real human suffering but also as a form of protest against that suffering (Luchte, 2009:413, 414; Thinane, 2021:10, 11; Dube, 2012). Dube (2012:352, 363), who studies Zimbabwean charismatic and Pentecostal churches, argues that Zimbabweans within these Ministries used spiritual language, including demon exorcism, to voice their dissatisfaction with the Mugabe regime (1980 – 2017).



According to Marx, religion reflects lived experiences of alienation and frustration produced by socio-economic realities (Uchegbue, 2011:57). In essence, there is a strong relationship between suffering and religion. One may, therefore, argue that struggle and suffering are reasons for seeking help from what is unnatural. Further, Marx contends that religion is the opium of the poor since oppressed people are likely to find solace in religion as it has a calming effect and helps people cope with challenging episodes of life (Marx & Engels, 1964:43). Vladimir Lenin (1965:83) concurs that religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man. Marx, however, recognises that religion can function as more than just an escape but also as a form of protest against the conditions of oppression in a society (Lefever, 1977:5). The struggle of exploring life for such meaning becomes a projection and a visible protest of human suffering and struggles in the world. According to Uchegbue (2011:58), “the fact that people turn to religion is an expression of their comfortability with the distressing condition of social life and of their desire to find a solution to the miseries of life.” Remhof (2018:1) supports this view by writing that “the idea of God emerges to provide light in a dark world. From antiquity to today, most people turn to God when awful tragedies happen.”

Two issues are evident in this discussion. Firstly, for religion to be tangible, it has to represent the everyday conditions and realities of the people. One may therefore argue that religion becomes false when it uses mystification to hide the truth about human conditions and suffering in the world (Thinane, 2021:10, 11). Secondly, a true religion should not just present the image of the human condition but also needs to participate in exploring ways to respond to the questions and misery of humankind. If religion hypnotises people not to see their human realities and fails to change their actual conditions, then that is a false religion.

The Azusa Street Revival and its influence on today’s Pentecostal churches

Generally, charismatic Pentecostal churches are the fastest-growing churches in Africa. Scholars do not agree on the best definition of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, nor do they agree on when the terms should be used (Ganiel, 2010:2). Most distinctions between Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity are based on historical development or denominational identity. Historically, the modern Pentecostal movement originates from the African Methodist Episcopal Church revival meetings in a building on Azusa Street, Los Angeles, between 1906 and 1909 (Robbins, 2004:120). Most scholars agree that as much as global Pentecostalism has multiple origins, the Azusa Street Revival (ASR) was key to the birth of a distinctly Pentecostal form of Christianity. According to Machingura (2011:16), the ASR is the name given to meetings conducted in the Methodist church at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles between 1906 and 1909. In one way or another, this revival frames the identities of millions of Pentecostal Christians worldwide.

Since the ASR, various authors have discussed diverse facets of it. Of interest to this paper is its role and relationship to the socio-economic conditions of the time. Day (2021:612) contends that the ASR of 1906 is one of the most important revivals in early Pentecostalism and prompts a rethinking of the Christian political imagination. Day (2021:612) further argues that the ASR embodied a non-statist idea of the citizen, encouraging radically inclusive practices of political belonging. According to Kgatla (2016:322), the ASR and twentieth-century Pentecostalism originated from the womb of the Black religious experience and reached out to the Black masses. Just like the membership of today’s Pentecostal churches, most ASR members were poor masses who found peace in evidence-based doctrine and outward manifestation of gifting (Jentile, 2010:21). For instance, William Seymour, principal founder of the ASR, was the son of a former slave from Louisiana who worked on plantations (Letson, 2007:114, Robeck, 2007:78). At the time of the ASR, the emphasis was on the baptism of fire, also known as Holy Spirit baptism, which was made evident by speaking in strange heavenly tongues or glossolalia. Azusa Street believers (1906-1915) came to perceive speaking in tongues as a



spiritual phenomenon symbolising the many distinct advantages and blessings of Holy Spirit baptism (Friesen, 2009:52).

Azusa's socio-economic and spiritual posture lay in its eschatological view, which emphasised the end-times restoration based on the book of Acts. Consequently, the movement was known for its non-sexist and non-racist mission and heavenly emphasis. It had several women leaders, which was unthinkable at the time for churches to ordain women in America. Secondly, as a non-racial movement, it brought together Blacks, Whites, Syrians, Spaniards and Italians at a time when America was a deeply racialised society (Wickham, 2014:42). Such racial integration under the authority of an African American pastor was seen as a highly remarkable achievement (Wickham, 2014: 42). Lastly, ASR theology emphasised the end times and was based on the fulfilment of the promise made by Christ in the book of Acts (Creech, 1996:407). At that time, there was much less emphasis on prosperity than there is in the current incarnation of Christian Pentecostalism.

Due to its mission, the ASR produced an unparalleled number of missionaries. Within five months of the movement's inception, forty-eight missionaries had left Azusa. It had expanded to over fifty countries in just two years. China, India, Japan, the Philippines, South Africa, the Middle East, and Liberia were among the countries reached (Bergunder, 2007:65). Today, within the USA and across the world, charismatic and Pentecostal churches are known for their emphasis on spirit-filling, praying in tongues, miracles and financial prosperity.

The rise of Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe

Scholars agree that the Christian religion changed the African continent's socio-economic, political and cultural outlooks (Ntombana, 2016:108; Wanamaka, 1987:281; Anderson & Pillay, 1997). In the early nineteenth century, various European and North American missionary societies sent their missionaries to African countries to embark on a campaign to convert African people to Christianity (Nmah, 2010:484; Ntombana, 2016:108). The work of missionaries gave birth to different formations, such as mission or mainline Churches – such as the Methodist, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Monrovia churches – and various charismatic and Pentecostal denominations – such as the Faith Mission and Full Gospel Church (Anderson & Pillay 1997:229; Clark, 2005:144). As with most other African countries, the Pentecostal movement made its way to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the early 1900s. The main Pentecostal churches then were the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), which came from South Africa, and the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), which emanated from the Assemblies of God Africa (AOGA) (Strohbehn, 2005; Maxwell, 2006). Since then, various splinters of Pentecostal churches have sprung up across the African continent (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Omenyo, 2014) in countries such as Zambia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania

In recent years, charismatic Pentecostal churches, characterised by the dominant position of the charismatic founder, popularly referred to as Prophet, Papa, Daddy, or Apostle, have been the fastest-growing religious movement in Africa (Khumalo 2014:224; Jentile, 2010:1). In Zimbabwe, Pentecostals represent about 20% of the population (ZIMSTAT, 2017:xi). Since early 2000, several Pentecostal ministries have emerged and quickly become massive financial success stories in Zimbabwe amidst one of the worst economic meltdowns the world has ever seen. Indeed, the proliferation of these ministries seems to be directly correlated with the worsening socio-economic crises of the past two decades, as the Pentecostal movement has become much more prevalent than in the 1980s and 1990s (Lindhardt, 2015:1). Some African Pentecostal ministry leaders are included in the list of the world's wealthiest pastors due to the personal wealth that they have accumulated. For example, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, the founder of the United Family International Church (UFIC) in Zimbabwe, has a net worth of US\$150 million, which he has amassed through several business endeavours (Chitando et al., 2013:153; Eastwood, 2022). Another Zimbabwean prophet, Walter Magaya,



founder of Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries, is reported to be worth US\$140 million and has investments in various business ventures (Eastwood, 2022). Furthermore, Archbishop Ezekiel Guti, founder of Forward in Faith Ministries International, which now operates in various other countries, is believed to have a net worth of US\$130 million, according to Eastwood (2022), while Prophet Uebert Angel, founder of Spirit Embassy Church (SEC), popularly known as Good News World, is reported to be worth US\$80 million (Eastwood, 2022). Finally, Prophet Passion Java, the founder of Passion Java Ministries, is also a successful businessman with a net worth of US\$50 million (Eastwood, 2022).

These Ministries have been able to pull large crowds in Zimbabwe. For instance, it was reported that more than 150,000 people attended the all-night prayer organised by Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa on 19 April 2014 (Daily News, 22/04/2014). Also, Prophet Walter Magaya is believed to have brought together 350,000 to his Waterfalls Church premises for an all-night prayer on 7 November 2014 (Kamhungira, Daily News, 10/11/2014).

One of the most distinguishing qualities of contemporary Pentecostal movements is their technological sophistication (Hackett, 1998). They use media tools to grow their ministry and extend their reach beyond national borders. Most of them own television channels, and their faces are on billboards as well as on public and private transportation vehicles. The urban environment in Zimbabwe is dominated by massive billboards, banners and posters proclaiming the end of pain, disease, poverty and barrenness. Thus, the 'men of God', and a remarkably small number of 'women of God', claim to have the power to end all types of suffering and empower God's people to enjoy health and happiness. This reflects their use of contextual theology that answers the anxieties of the believers, given that health and well-being are at the centre of traditional religions (Shoko, 2007). Their message and ministry are replete with references to evil spirits and forces that harm people's health and happiness. In addition, they exorcise spiritual husbands/wives, the spirit of poverty, marine spirits, and other evil entities that keep people and families from living happily ever after. In their preaching, they emphasise prosperity and success even as most of their members become poorer while they become rich with funds collected from those same poor people (Togarasei, 2011). Wealth and prosperity form the central teachings, with congregants encouraged to give 'offerings' to the church. For instance, some demand that a tenth of one's income should be given as an offering or tithe in church. However, congregants are encouraged to give more than the minimum if they wish to maximise the benefits. On hearing that the more one gives, the more one gets, some congregants go to great lengths to mobilise funds for the church to attract more blessings from God. Those who remain poor are rebuked for lack of faith and for failing to 'sow' enough seed to attract God's favour in return, only to remain poor despite their efforts. Indeed, the only ones able to escape poverty are the preachers, their families and their associates.

Past church initiatives seem to differ very much from recent ministries that promote the amassing of wealth by individuals and their particular families (Alamdari, 2004). Nonetheless, new aspects of religion where the pastors become the centre of wealth accumulation, much to the emulation of their congregants, have become a common sight. Moreover, the influence of these leaders extends beyond national borders, promoting a phenomenon known as 'religious tourism' (DeTemple, 2006) as people come from all over the world in search of good fortune and prosperity. As a result, churches now seem to be operating as business ventures that support a broad economy, drawing participants from a large spectrum of society. While some older Pentecostal churches assert that excessive focus on 'miracle money', where, for instance, money mysteriously finds its way into the pockets of those present, is not coherent with the gospel, believers are generally agreed that they are called to enjoy this earthly life.



Discussion

One of the strongest foundations of charismatic Pentecostal churches is the emphasis on prosperity gospel. The situation in Zimbabwe and other African countries is a paradox where believers are promised financial prosperity, which ends up being achieved by church leaders at the expense of the believers, who remain poor. The emphasis on miracles and prosperity gospel has played a dramatic role in drawing large followings, resulting in certain pastors becoming overnight superstars and global icons. Their celebrity status is invariably accompanied by earthly riches, which the pastors unashamedly display as evidence of their faithfulness to God. It is not unusual for today's pastors to drive luxury cars, own palatial houses (multiple estates in some instances), have offshore bank accounts, and compete favourably with corporate business executives. This, to some, bears testimony of the manifestation of God's blessings bestowed on his faithful servants, yet others question the sincerity of such religious leaders.

Although the Zimbabwean populace has, for many decades, mainly been Christian, the charismatic Pentecostal movement has attracted many followers in recent times. Rented stadiums fill up during overnight meetings led by famous charismatic preachers. However, what attracts such a huge following? Whilst some argue that people finally see the light, that those with ears have heard and believed, others attribute the success of this movement to the message preached by their leaders. Messages from 'prophets' in these services function as opium that kills the pain and suffering of the masses. In the context of Zimbabwe, where the country has been in turmoil for so long, messages from these movements may have helped keep people sane and perpetually hopeful. Noting that most people are stressed by socio-economic challenges and afflicted by diseases, promising people easy solutions finds traction.

The message of hope is vital, and these movements have managed to convey that message to motivate those low and down. When in distress, one does not want to be told about doom and judgement in heaven, that their problems are part of life, or that their blessings await them in some distant heavenly future. People long for immediate solutions to their problems. They want their poverty cast out today; they want to be successful today, to see a change in their businesses, to get a promotion at work, and to be employed in the 'here and now'. Therefore, by promising immediate solutions through miracles, the prosperity gospel movement has found favour in the eyes of many. Some believers have claimed to receive desired blessings as soon as the 'man of God' laid a hand on them. However, others attend services frequently, hoping to receive similar miracles. In some way, parallels can be drawn here with the operations of the lotto, where some instantly win while others keep pouring money into the lottery, hoping for their win to come. Believers have thus 'planted' a lot of their money in Pentecostal churches believing they will 'reap' a huge harvest and receive their blessings from God.

Conclusion

The prosperity gospel movement has recently gained popularity, especially in urban areas where people have experienced sustained hardships. In the face of unending economic problems, religion and the church have become central to human existence in most cities in Zimbabwe, as conventional explanations of poverty and dispossession have been rendered unsatisfactory. The meaning of life has been lost to many; as they lose faith in the conventional economy, religious solutions become the only relevant answers to their existential challenges. The phenomenal growth of prosperity gospel churches could thus be located in Zimbabwe's social, economic and political trauma. The gaps created by the collapsing economy and the closure of economic opportunities in the industrial sector have provided a conducive environment for the emergence of religious formations promising quick riches to those afflicted.



Believers spend much time in these churches beseeching God to bless them with earthly riches and provide an escape from poverty and suffering. In the context of a depressed economic environment, many people experience anxiety. They seek answers for the problems bedeviling their country and livelihoods. Pentecostal faith, through its promises, has played a calming effect on people's lives, thereby providing psychological therapy for the hounded. It has thus filled a void by giving hope and promising a return to the 'good life' and glory days. The rapidly amassed wealth of the charismatic leaders is compelling evidence to their followers that they, too, can become rich if they pray, tithe, and generally live by the precepts of their prophet. As Marx argued, those oppressed by social, economic, political, and even spiritual demons in Zimbabwe's cities have found solace in religion. Thus, 'spiritual booze', as Vladimir Lenin (1965) posits, drowns the misery of the Zimbabwean urbanites and cushions them from facing reality with sober minds. Even if one wants to support an argument that ministries are there to improve the lives of Zimbabweans, it would be too difficult to prove given that even today, only a few have become rich from these ministries. Furthermore, the wealth made by the few pastors/prophets is flaunted to make a statement of God's blessings, while on the contrary, only a few benefit from it. One example is the recent cash flaunting by one of the Zimbabwean prophets known for living an extravagant lifestyle. According to various South African newspapers, Passion Java hosted a birthday party where he spent more than 1.3 million on food and alcohol in one night, with a lucky waiter receiving a whopping R124,000 tip (Newsday Zimbabwe, 20/01/2022; News24, 24/01/2022). By that, we do not suggest that those who can afford to should not spend their cash to enjoy themselves. We simply question such an expenditure considering that the prophet leads a poor church in Zimbabwe characterised by a severe economic meltdown.

This paper has demonstrated that the rise of charismatic churches in Zimbabwe coincided with the economic decline that began in 2000. Due to the increasing socio-economic problems, we argue that people have sought solace in religion, where there are both material and spiritual promises. In some instances, this search for solace has increased the vulnerability of particular groups of people. Some are pressured to make irrational decisions where they dispose of their property and even get into debt, hoping that spiritual solutions will translate into material well-being. There is a need for continuous awareness programmes by both the government and non-governmental organisations to protect people from potential exploitation when faced with difficult life circumstances. Furthermore, it could be helpful to regulate religious practices so that unscrupulous opportunists do not abuse religion to defraud unsuspecting and desperate followers.

Religion should be a way of life that makes individuals realise their full potential and not an inhibiting force, enriching a few at the expense of the many. Even if one wants to support the argument that Pentecostal ministries are there to improve the lives of Zimbabweans, it would be too difficult to prove, given that very few, if any, ordinary believers have become rich from these ministries. On the contrary, some pastors and prophets become incredibly rich and flaunt their wealth for all to see. We conclude that prosperity gospel thrives on giving false hope designed to milk Zimbabweans of the little they have left after being ravaged by decades of economic and political turmoil.

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