Introduction: What’s in a Name?

Many religions encourage their followers to seek prosperity in the form of good health, material plenty or harmonious social relations. In his magisterial survey of religious protest and aspiration, *Magic and the Millennium* (1973), the sociologist Bryan Wilson provides an extensive account of the multiple dreams of material as well as spiritual salvation that have inspired social movements in the non-Western world. The etymology of the term ‘prosperity’ is itself suggestive, combining *pro* (for) with *spes* (hope). It might therefore seem that a theology based on such sentiments would be uncontroversial. And yet, the Prosperity Gospel—as a high-profile dimension of currently burgeoning neo-Pentecostal and charismatic activities around the world—has attracted not only academic interest but also passionate criticism in recent decades, often from fellow Christians as well as secular commentators.

In this chapter, I provide a brief characterisation of the Prosperity Gospel, covering its history and manifestations in different parts of the globe. I compare some of the ways in which analysts have tried to explain its spread, and explore reasons why it has attracted so much critique, and even anger. However, I also question the idea that we can regard ‘it’ as a fully unified movement or internally consistent theological position. Admittedly, many ideological affinities and social connections can be traced between Prosperity-oriented Christians. ¹ Stephen Hunt is justified in noting (Hunt 2002: 6) that in certain respects the Gospel “constitutes a distinctive wing of contemporary Pentecostal movement, with its own style and ethos and clearly overlain with a materialistic culture”. At the same time, what also interest me are the adaptability and flexibility of Prosperity messages and associated practices as they have diffused and morphed throughout a wide variety of Christian circles and beyond.

Ultimately, I suggest that we might think of such Prosperity discourse as manifested less in a single Gospel *per se*, and more in a set of ethical practices

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¹ When capitalised, Prosperity refers in this chapter to the Prosperity Gospel.
that can be combined and reconstituted in very different cultural contexts, and
which may in fact work through ambiguity and play as much as through the
expression of apparently firm and exclusive religious convictions. In common
with many such ‘tricksterish’ cultural forms, Prosperity practices arouse feel-
ings of unease as well as delight, ambivalence as well as inspiration, in those
who observe their workings. But even in their ambiguities, they also point us
towards much wider questions of religio-political significance, towards critical
reflections on what have been depicted as shifts in authority and influence
from the global North to the global South in relation to Christian movements
(Jenkins 2002). We shall touch on these wider issues later in this piece, but first
we must examine the origins and scope of the Prosperity Gospel.

American Origins?

We shall consider cross-cultural dimensions below, but even if we focus on the
United States we soon see that the ideological streams that have fed into the
development of the Gospel have been highly complex. Of course, prosperity
itself is hardly a new theme within American revivalism. Robert Wauzzinski
(1993: 220) traces the relations between nineteenth-century Protestant evan-
gelicalism and the Industrial Revolution, noting that ideological tendencies of
the period conflated “the materialistic progress of capitalism with the coming
of the kingdom of God”.

At the same time, some very specific influences can be traced in the emer-
gence of what was to become known in the United States as the Prosperity—or
Health and Wealth—Gospel. Kate Bowler (2013: 11) sees it as composed of three
intersecting streams: Pentecostalism; New Thought (a striking amalgam of
metaphysics and Protestantism); and a more general American gospel of prag-
matism, individualism, and upward mobility. Another religious historian, Dennis
Hollinger (1991: 58), argues that the powerful combination of New Thought and
healing revivalist tradition resonated well with an early Pentecostalism that
actively sought miraculous signs of the transformation of the born-again
believer. The development of New Thought itself can be traced in part to the
maverick healer Phineas P. Quimby (1802–1866), a student of parapsychology
who was said to have healed and influenced Mary Baker Eddy, founder of
Christian Science. However, its theological amalgamation with evangelicalism
came most notably through E.W. Kenyon (1867–1948), not a Pentecostalist as
such but the founder of a Bible Institute in Massachusetts, sometime itinerant
preacher and—in the latter part of his life—a pioneer in radio evangelism.