


# Mediating God's relationality? A trinitarian perichoretic critique of the reliance on anointed objects in African neo-Pentecostalism

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This article uses the perichoretic nature of the Trinity to evaluate the reliance on anointed objects as instruments of connecting with God amongst African neo-Pentecostal Christians. The article answers the question: from a perspective of the relationality of God, how can we evaluate the African neo-Pentecostal reliance on anointed objects to connect with God? The aim is to show that the perichoretic nature of the Trinity demands that a direct relationship with the Godhead be possible without the intermediary and impersonalising use of anointed objects. The use of anointed objects to connect with God impersonalises him and undermines his relationality, as depicted in his perichoretic triune nature. The significance of the article lies in calling for African neo-Pentecostals to inform their quest for an intimate connection with God by a critical understanding of his perichoretic trinitarian communal ontology.

**Keywords:** Anointed articles, African neo-Pentecostalism, The Trinity in Africa, Perichoresis, The Trinity and God's relationality, Spiritual security in African Christianity, The Trinity and Spiritual security in Africa

## Introduction

This article evaluates the African neo-Pentecostal reliance on anointed objects as a means for intimate connection with God from a perspective of his relationality, as depicted by the perichoretic understanding of the Holy Trinity. The article focusses on African neo-Pentecostalism, which is different from classical Pentecostalism. Neo-Pentecostalism is principally a movement of prophets, apostles and pastors who claim unique and unparalleled anointing and appointment from God. They claim to be in the lineage of the biblical prophets, but sometimes make subtle claims of superiority to biblical prophets. Anointed objects refer to articles, such as oil, water, armbands and pieces of clothing items, portraits of the prophets and various other artefacts, that the prophets bless and give or sell to their followers as a means of communicating God's presence to the believer (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:234; Biri 2012:7; Deke 2015:7; Manzvanzvike 2014; Power Healing and Deliverance [PHD] Ministries 2018). The use of anointed objects is not unique to African Pentecostal prophets. Roman Catholicism and African Independent Churches have a rich history of using various kinds of icons and articles in public worship and private-personal use. There are also numerous instances in the Bible where various objects were used to perform miracles. These include Aaron's staff (Ex 7:8-13), water (2 Ki 5:14), mud (Jn 9:6-7), clothing items and even the Apostles' physical bodies (Ac 19:11-12) to effect miraculous healing. There is debate amongst Christians regarding the interpretation of James 5:14, which commands that church elders should anoint the sick with oil whilst praying for them. To some extent, depending on one's interpretation, the elements used in baptism and the Lord's Supper can function as anointed objects. However, this article concentrates on the use of objects used by African neo-Pentecostals because it has attracted great debate in modern African Christianity. Furthermore, neo-Pentecostals claim to practise a 'fresh' biblically undiluted and truly God-centred faith. There is therefore a need to test the biblical and theological validity of the use of anointed articles in African neo-Pentecostalism.

The main question in this article is, 'from a perspective of the relationality of God, how can we evaluate the reliance on anointed objects to connect with God amongst African neo-Pentecostals?'. The article evaluates the implications of the use of anointed objects on how God relates to his people and works in their lives. It will be argued that the use of anointed articles in African neo-Pentecostalism thrives on a limited understanding of God's relationality, as reflected in God's trinitarian nature. The perichoretic relations of the three divine persons of the Trinity are used to argue that the use of anointed articles distorts God's relationality and turns the Godself into an impersonal being.

## The use of anointed objects as a means of connecting with God

In African neo-Pentecostalism, anointed objects function as instruments for mediating God's active presence in the believers' lives. A primary role played by the anointed objects is bringing the powerful presence of God to the believer, therefore connecting the believer with God. For instance, Apostle Freshman Roger Gwasira, the leader of Anointed Ministers Ministries International, was quoted by Manzvanzvike (2014), a reporter for one of Zimbabwe's weekly newspapers, *The Sunday Mail*, as saying:

In this dispensation of grace, Jesus is pouring out His favour and divine influence in many ways. He shows us His grace by availing and revealing His unlimited power and ability to transfer His anointing through water and oil, to name but a few that are common to man [*sic*]. Subsequently, whatever God touches becomes anointed. Therefore, water or oil cannot be an exception. Anointed water remains one of the things we need in order to experience the touch of God in our lives. (n.p.)

Thus, anointed water functions as an instrument of transmitting God's presence and power to Christians in need. From the above quoted text, believers need anointed objects to receive or experience the touch of God in their lives. Thus, the anointed objects are channels of bringing the active presence of God into the believers' lives. Manzvanzvike (2014) further quoted Apostle Gwasira giving a long list of the achievements of the working power of the anointed articles:

Breech pregnancies have been repositioned instantly resulting in safe baby deliveries; the blind have received their sight; the deaf hearing; HIV and AIDS being cured; demonic forces confessing and being loosed from people; court cases being ruled in favour of those that drank the anointing water; businesses that were taking a nose dive attracting favour and blessed to flourishing; jobs and promotions being received; restoration of marriages; people excelling in academic exams; people involved in accidents escaping unharmed; cancers being healed and even bullets and glass particles miraculously removed from the bodies of those involved in road accidents. Testimonies of God's grace have been overwhelming. (n.p.)

This list highlights that the anointed objects are filled with God's power and those who possess them can miraculously overcome any undesired conditions. These objects provide 'access [to] the limitless supremacy of our Lord Jesus Christ to all the people [*sic*]' and 'dissolve frustrations, bring restoration, to avail free healing and pave way for a better life for them' (Gwasira, in Manzvanzvike 2014). Biri (2012:5–7) recorded numerous testimonies from Christians about their victorious experiences after using the anointed objects provided by Archbishop Ezekiel Guti and Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, some of the prominent neo-Pentecostal leaders in Zimbabwe.

The use of anointed objects asserts the mediatory role played by the neo-Pentecostal prophets and apostles between God and ordinary Christians. *The Sunday Mail* (2014) carried an article, entitled 'Prophet Magaya and Power of "Voice Anointing"', and reported that the voice of Prophet Walter

Magaya, of the PHD Ministries, was uniquely anointed to expel demons by calling them out with their names. Any spiritual impediment that heard his voice fell away. On another occasion, Magaya used his previously worn clothes to anoint people (Magaya 2016). This shows that the prophet's physical body is ultimately sacralised as an instrument that can transmit God's power to do miraculous works. This sacralisation of the body of the prophet creates great dependency on him in his followers.

Therefore, a significant motivation in the growing reliance on anointed objects is intimacy with God. People turn to the anointed objects provided by the prophets believing that these will bring them closer to God as the anointed objects 'mediate God's presence in power, healing, deliverance, and protection against the evils of life' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:236–237). A point of major concern is that neo-Pentecostal apostles and prophets sacralise their anointed objects without showing any awareness of the theological contradiction of tying God's sovereign power and his desire to freely heal and restore all troubled people to objects such as water and oil packaged in small bottles branded with the names of the apostles and prophets. Furthermore, the idea of having to pay money to experience God's healing and protection presents serious conflicts about the availability of God's grace to all people, particularly to the poor who have money. The idea of paying for anointed objects contradicts the examples of biblical prophets like Elisha who refused Naaman's offer of gifts after healing and Jesus the Saviour who freely healed those he encountered.

## The distortion of God's relationality in the Christian use of anointed objects

If it is correct to say that the anointed objects in African neo-Pentecostalism function as instruments of attaining intimate connection with God, what notions about God's relationality can we discern from African neo-Pentecostalism?

### Intimacy with God is governed by possession of anointed objects

The use of anointed objects from neo-Pentecostal ministers indicates that intimacy with God is governed by one's possession of the anointed objects and the skills to master God and cause him to work in one's life and affairs. Intimacy refers to a close relationship with God, an intimate presence and work of God in the believer's life or an experience of a special wonder working power or life-changing miraculous power of God in the life of the believer. The use of anointed objects promotes the idea that God limits his best relationships to those with anointed objects, which means that without the anointed objects Christians cannot experience the intimate working power of God. Prophet Magaya's PHD Ministries (2018) website presents anointed water as:

A power-packed [*mantle*] anointed with the power and anointing of our Lord Christ to meet your point of need. You could be ailing, it carries your healing. You could be in bondage it carries

your deliverance, whatsoever you might require in your life the water of life carries your answers to it. We thank God Almighty for yet another power-packed mantle set to transform lives of thousands around the globe. (n.p.)

Prophet Magaya suggests that the use of anointed water takes one to a higher intimacy with God. However, this contradicts the role of personal faith in connecting the believer to God and elevates the role of anointed objects in a way that ultimately questions God's interpersonal relationality with the believers. It also undermines or totally replaces the biblically given means of entreating with God such as prayer. Ultimately, anointed objects impersonalise God by making him only relatable through anointed objects instead of through personal faith in him. It places God's presence and power into the anointed objects.

This use of anointed articles to access God's power is challenged by God's personal and spiritual nature and his attributes such as omnipresence, transcendence and immensity. However, one may say that neo-Pentecostals use anointed objects with faith in God. This point is disputed by the fact that the relational God who said through Christ 'Lo, I am with you always' (Mt 28:20) wants people to relate and depend on him directly and not through anointed objects.

### The promotion of human-mediated access to God

The impersonalisation of God noted above promotes human-mediated access to God. That is, the impersonalisation of God disables the ordinary believer's direct personal access to him by promoting the idea that access to God is only through the anointed prophets, apostles and pastors. The use of anointed objects creates a gap between God and the believer, which can only be closed by the objects. To some extent, anointed objects democratise access to God by providing many symbols of God's presence and power, which ordinary people can use in their moments of crises and when in their need of divine intervention (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:232). The abundance of anointed objects may symbolise God's abundant presence, but they do more harm than good by paradoxically playing a role that limits people's access to God except through the objects themselves. The system creates an insatiable longing for new and more powerful anointed objects.

Furthermore, neo-Pentecostalism is by its nature sustained by the mediation of the prophets. The human-mediated nature of neo-Pentecostalism is evidenced by media reports that Prophet Shepherd Bushiri based in South Africa invited people to a special gala in Pretoria. A seat at the high table cost R25 000 whilst that at an ordinary table cost R1000 (Magadla 2017). Seating closer to the Man of God cost more because proximity to the prophet was believed to be proximity to God. As Kgatle (2019:2) indicated, multitudes constantly throng Bushiri's Enlightened Christian Gathering church, practically camping for long hours at the city gates of Pretoria and paying a fortune for an opportunity to have personal encounters with the prophet. This is a common phenomenon amongst neo-Pentecostal prophets as the prophets' headquarters often

function as shrines attracting thousands of pilgrims seeking one-on-one encounters with the prophets. This creates a strong impression that the prophets' bodily presence, their voice and the special objects blessed by them contain the presence of God (The Sunday Mail 2014).

### The promotion of a transactional view of God's blessing

Neo-Pentecostal ministers promote a transactional view of God's blessings by teaching that gifts and offerings are required for one to experience God's unique presence and blessings (Mahohoma 2017:3; The Sunday Mail 2017). The view places higher value on transactional actions, which ultimately either competes with relational faith in God or undermines it. Although the Bible promises that God blesses those who give to him generously and sacrificially (2 Cor 9:6-11), it is, however, biblically questionable if the sacrificial and generous giving required by God is for the enrichment of the prophets by poor congregants, resulting in a form of 'white colour prophecy' (Mangena & Mhizha 2013:145) and 'commercialising church items in order to amass wealth' (Chibango 2016:60). To evidence a transactional view of God's blessings, some neo-Pentecostals reserve more powerful anointed objects to people who give more material and monetary gifts in addition to charging for 'one-on-one' consultations with people in need of prophetic services (Kgatle 2019:4).

Thus, in the above noted example of Bushiri, those who paid more money were able to have a seat closer to the prophet. In some church services, prophets conduct special personalised prayers for those who would have given larger amounts of money. The transactional view believes that a Christian's state of blessedness is through possessing anointed objects.

A serious problem with the transactional view of God's presence and his blessings in the believer's life is the subtle delinking of salvation and faith by giving the impression that whilst faith is important, it is the anointed objects that really move God to work favourably in a believer's life. Deke (2015) described the problem as follows:

The idea of salvation is taken from the Christian faith, but is changed. New conditions for salvation are given, such as purchase of anointed products, allegiance, the use of certain sacraments and commitment to the organization. Members are thus obliged to fulfil these claims before they can be sure of salvation. Anointed towels, anointed bangles, anointed grass, anointed rings, anointed portraits of the prophets, talismans, oils and all forms of objects have become a common feature in Pentecostalism and African Christianity. (p. 7)

In short, God's presence and work in the believer are viewed as transactional benefits instead of gracious gifts God gives to his people.

It would indeed be a false and malicious accusation to say that neo-Pentecostals do not emphasise obedient relational faith in God as necessary for one to be blessed by God. However, whatever strong emphasis is made on personal faith amongst neo-Pentecostals, it is weakened by an emphasis on the supreme

power of the anointed objects in bringing God's power to solve problems faced by the believers. The transactional view of God's blessings and presence undermines personal faith in Christ as a prerequisite for entering into a relationship with God.

Thus, a serious problem in the use of anointed objects is the distortion of God as an impersonal being and undermining his relationality, which is experienced through personal faith.

## The relationality of God and its challenge to anointed objects

A serious problem that emerges in the neo-Pentecostal's reliance on the anointed objects from the prophets and apostles is a quest for intimacy with God, which is uninformed by how God relates with his people and participates in their human and spiritual affairs. Therefore, it is proposed that an important step towards addressing the neo-Pentecostal reliance on anointed objects is promoting an awareness of God as a relational divine being who personally relates and engages in the affairs of his people. The doctrine of the relationality of God challenges the common tendency of treating God as an impersonal divine being who is mastered and manipulated by anointed objects and acts of religiosity.

### The biblical idea of God as a relational being

The Bible presents God as a personal and relational being who impinges on the life and affairs of human beings on personal terms. Relationality is used in this article to mean God's capacity to relate with people in an interpersonal manner, which means that people can personally relate with him in his absolute transcendent spiritual nature. God is a person and not a force or mystical power. A principal point in God's commandment against idol worship (Ex 20:3–6) is the fact that unlike impersonal lifeless idols, he is a personal being. The commandment against idolatry speaks to God's spiritual and personal nature. It is emphasised here that God is without gender in his personhood, being neither male nor female. We must think of God in inclusive gender-neutral terms.

Repeatedly, in the Bible, God mocks those who practise idolatry as serving dead objects that can neither hear them nor respond to their needs (Is 45:20) and are immobile needing to be carried around by their worshippers (Is 46:1). But, unlike these inanimate creations and all manner of impersonal forces, God as a personal being is self-conscious (Ex 3:13–15), has a will and freedom to act as he wills (Is 46:9, 10), has intellect (Is 55:8–9) and has emotions (Heb 3:10). These biblical verses and a host of others like them distinguish God as personal ontologically. Erickson (1998:295) highlighted that one of the many ways in which God's personality is indicated is the fact that God has a name he assigns to himself – YHWH (I AM, often rendered as Jehovah) – by which he reveals himself (Ex 3:14).

By revealing himself by his name, God demonstrates that he is not an abstract idea, an unknowable being or a nameless

mystical force (Erickson 1998:295). It is significant that YHWH 'is not used merely to refer to God or describe him, but also to address him' (Erickson 1998:295). As Erickson (1998:295–296) further highlighted, the nature of the reverence demanded by God's name affirms his personality because it is a form of reverence that is not necessary for a place or object. As a personal being, God is relational.

It is important to recognise that the particular names assumed by the personal God 'refer primarily to his relationship with persons rather than with nature' (Erickson 1998:296). The descriptions of God as a saviour, who is truthful, faithful, good, loving, merciful, gracious, patient, compassionate, forgiving and guiding, show God as a personal being who has interpersonal relationships with his people. Whilst these communicable attributes do indeed describe what God is like in his ontology, their primary reference is always with God's actions and attitudes in relating to people, thus affirming God as a personal being, and not merely an impersonal divine power. That God is a person means that we can approach him and speak to him – in brief, we can relate with him on personal terms. Therefore 'God is to be treated as a being, not an object or force to be used or manipulated' (Erickson 1998:296).

### The relationality of God in his trinitarian perichoresis

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the belief that God is interpersonal in his ontology.

The interpersonal relationality of God is affirmed by the *perichoretic* relations within the Trinity. The Greek word *perichoresis* describes how the three persons of the Trinity interpenetrate each other in their unity but are distinct and absolutely equal. This article is not interested in elaborate descriptions of the Trinity but only concentrates on highlighting that the perichoretic nature of the Trinity shows that a direct relationship with the Godhead is possible without the intermediary and impersonalising use of anointed objects.

Although very important, extensive biblical descriptions of the Trinity will divert from the actual issue at hand of underscoring the relationality of God. 'Trinity' and 'perichoresis' are non-biblical words that originated from attempts by the church in antiquity to articulate and defend the divinity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. The terms articulate and defend the distinctions and equality of the three persons of the Trinity from various heresies such as modalism (the idea that the one God has appeared in three different modes) and tritheism (the idea of three united gods).

The doctrine of the Trinity is significant to both the reality and uniqueness of the Christian faith (Erickson 1998:347; Grudem 1994:226; Horton 2011:273). The doctrine of the Trinity shows that God is an incomprehensible mystery, even though human beings can speak about him intelligibly (Crisp 2005:120; Erickson 1998:363). The biblical writers do not present us with explicit propositions of the Trinity; they condemn idol worship (1 Cor 8:6; 1 Th 1:9) and yet present

the One God in trinitarian terms and Christianity as anchored on a trinitarian deity (Mt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13–14) (Horton 2011:276–277; Volf 2006:3). To Torrance (1996:2), the Holy Trinity is ‘the innermost heart of Christian faith and worship, the central dogma of classical theology, the fundamental grammar of our knowledge of God’.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational in orthodox Christianity because it describes ‘who God is, what he is like, how he works, and how he is to be approached’ (Erickson 1998:347).

*Perichoresis* or its Latin equivalent, *circumcessio* or *circuminsessio*, describes the mutual indwelling or mutual interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity (Smith 2001:907). Perichoresis attempts to capture the truth expressed in Jesus’s statement, ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me’ (Jn 14:11). The theological use of this concept first gained prominence in the 4th century patristic period to help express the unity of the divine and human natures of Christ (Torrance 1996:102). In Trinity, the concept expresses the mystery (Torrance 1996):

[O]f the way in which the three divine Persons mutually dwell in one another and coinhere or inexist in one another while nevertheless remaining other than one another and distinct from one another. (p. 102)

As a trinitarian term, perichoresis expresses ‘the complete mutually containing or interpenetration of the three divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in one God’ (Torrance 1996:102).

The term helps to express how Christ and the Holy Spirit are eternally of the same nature (*homoousios*), with the Father depicted in Christ’s declaration, ‘I am in the Father; the Father is in me’ (Jn 14:11) and ‘he who sees me sees the Father’ (Jn 14:9) and the Holy Spirit ‘will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you’ (Jn 14:26). In these statements, Jesus highlights a dynamic reciprocal union of ‘oneness in Being and Act’ or ‘triune coactivity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (Torrance 1996:194). Thus, perichoresis emphasises that the divine persons of the Trinity have dynamic union and communion, although each divine person has distinct individual hypostatic existence and hypostatic activities. That is (Torrance 1996):

The Father is not Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, the Son is not the Son apart from the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Spirit apart from the Father and the Son, for each is who he is in his wholeness as true God of true God in the wholeness of the other two who are each true God of true God, and yet in the mystery of their perichoretic interrelations they are not three Gods but one only God the Blessed and Holy Trinity. (p. 171)

Accordingly, the divine persons (Torrance 1996):

[H]ave their Being in each other and reciprocally contain one another, without any coalescing or commingling with one another and yet without any separation from one another, for they are completely equal and identical in Deity and Power. (p. 171)

In essence, the trinitarian persons interpenetrate each other whilst maintaining their individual distinction, the Father

<sup>1</sup>See Torrance (1996:1–12) for an extended exposition on the foundational significance of the Trinity in Christian faith and practice.

exists in the Son and in the Spirit but never loses his identity as the Father, and the same is true of the other two divine persons.

Relationally, God’s perichoresis is a dynamic relationship of eternal reciprocity and mutual interdependence within the divine persons of the Godhead. Grudem (1994) reasons that:

If there is no Trinity, then there were no interpersonal relationships within the being of God before creation, and, without personal relationships, it is difficult to see how God could be genuinely personal or be without the need for a creation to relate to. (p. 247)

In other words, ‘the triune nature of God makes clear that God is essentially a *relational* being’ (Fee 1996:46). The trinitarian dynamism is reflected in Jesus’ incarnation and ministry. In the Gospel of John (Torrance 1996):

[T]he self-revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit takes place through the Word and Work of Christ as they are integrated in his Life and Being, who as the incarnate *I am* of the Lord constitutes the one exclusive Way to the Father, for he who sees Jesus sees the Father. (p. 195)

Christ states that his ministerial activities are the activities of the Father living in him (Jn 14:11) and he stresses that his ministerial activities are through the Holy Spirit (Mk 3:29). This shows reciprocal unity, coactivity, mutual interdependence and inter-existence as the divine persons share their life-giving and life-sustaining power.

Relationality is reflected in Jesus’ statement to his disciples that when he returns to the Father, the Father will send to them the Holy Spirit to act in Christ’s place to continue his redemptive presence and work amongst his followers and in the world (Jn 16:5–15). This points to a communion in which the divine persons dwell in each other (Volf 2006:11). The ‘threefold coactivity of God’ or a ‘dynamic three-way reciprocity’ (Torrance 1996:195, 197) is further indicated in other trinitarian texts such as the Pauline benediction, ‘May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all’ (2 Cor 13:14).

Acting as a perichoretic ‘team’, it was only God the Son on the cross, whilst the Father received the sacrifice.

Jesus’ emphasis on the reciprocal love between himself and the Father (Jn 3:35), the love which the Father declared at the Son’s baptism (Mt 3:17), displays the eternal interpersonal relational nature of God. The biblical assertion that God is love (1 Jn 4:8) asserts an eternal attribute. God is eternally loving; he did not learn to love after humans sinned and needed to be saved from eternal death. In other words, there is reciprocal unity and triune coactivity within the Triune God, as the divine persons.

The mutual indwelling of one another by the persons of the Trinity can be characterised as the ‘perichoretic coactivity of the Holy Trinity’ (Torrance 1996:198). It can also be imaged as a “dancing around” of each other in which the mutual harmony and love among the persons of the Trinity find expression’

(Ferguson 1996:188). As an image of 'dancing around', perichoresis points to the 'eternal movement in the Love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for one another, which flows outward unceasingly toward us' (Torrance 1996:172). A perichoretic view of the Trinity points to the *koinonia* (intense communal fellowship) within the Triune God. That God is eternally triune in his nature means God's eternal ontology is relational and interpersonal, which means that the Godhead can be viewed as communal or social in its ontology.

### The soteriological significance of God's relationality

The idea that God is a relational divine being carries important soteriological connotations that emphasise God's interest in saving his people and his capacity to actively participate in their lives. A foundational point of understanding God's relationality is the soteriological mission in the incarnation of Christ, the entry point into a relationship with the Triune God (Jn 14:6; 1 Tm 2:5). Several biblical passages present Christ's mission of saving people as ultimately reconciling them to God (2 Cor 5:18–21; Eph 2:11–22). However, whilst the last half century has witnessed a renewed interest in trinitarian perichoresis, many of the prominent works seem more concerned with drawing from the doctrine's implications for social, practical, economic, ecological and ecclesiological problems than to elucidate the doctrine's implications on spiritual salvation (Kilby 2000; Otto 2001; Van den Brink 2014). In African theology, strictly trinitarian studies are much fewer than Christological and pneumatological studies, although trinitarian discussions may also feature in expositions on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Recent African theological scholarship on trinitarian perichoresis also tends to follow the example of developed world theologians and use perichoresis as a theological-ethical concept for responding to various social, gender, political and economic problems in the continent (Bitrus 2017; Jere 2018; Manganyi 2012; Manganyi & Buitendag 2017; Williams 2013). The main framework uses the loving communal relations within the Trinity as a theological-ethical paradigm for democracy, human and gender equality, social cohesion, and hospitality to foreigners and migrants, embracing those different from us. In spite of the immense value of this theological-ethical use of perichoresis, a serious drawback is that its spiritual soteriological value remains un(der)developed in African Christianity where perceptions about God remain strongly shaped by the African traditional religious view of God as an impersonal mystical power, which is mastered and manipulated by people's religiosity (Turaki 1999:181–198).

An awareness of the soteriological significance of the perichoresis is necessary to address the problem of reliance on anointed objects in African neo-Pentecostalism. Perichoresis (Torrance 1996):

[E]xpresses the soteriological truth of the identity between God himself and the content of his saving revelation in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, and thereby assures us that what God is towards us in Jesus Christ and in his Spirit he is inherently and eternally in himself. (p. 172)

This statement highlights that the work of the economic Trinity, God's redemptive work through Christ and through

the power of the Holy Spirit, was not a mere appendix, but work that took place within his very substantive divine being. Moltmann's (1974:205) metaphor of the 'crucified God' in spite of some of its serious problems highlights the involvement of the whole Trinity in the death of Christ in a way that shows the whole of the Triune God as relational and acting in solidarity with people who suffer. This shows God as a personal and relational being who is redemptively involved in the suffering of his people.

Perichoresis has soteriological significance because it affirms the 'saving Love of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit who reconciles us to himself and takes us up into Communion with himself' (Torrance 1996:172).

The soteriological significance of the perichoresis is expressed in Jesus' promise in John 14:20 to his disciples that when he returns to the Father, the Father will send the Spirit to them and: 'On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you'. That is, Christ's death on the cross opened an entrance into the perichoretic relationship with God. Using the image of the dancing curtain, Volf (1996:129) explained the atonement death of Christ as an opening for the repentant sinners to enter into the community of the Triune God and partake of God's life. He artistically stated (Volf 1996):

On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (Jn 17: 21). We, the others – we, the enemies – are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace. (p. 129)

The atonement death of Christ was the Triune God's act of relationality. Christ's atonement death, which ushered sinners into a relationship with God, affirms that intimacy with God is through the mediatory work of Christ and not the efficacious power of anointed objects. To Moltmann (2010), the overflowing love within the Trinity prompted the persons of the Trinity to:

[G]o beyond themselves and open themselves in creation, reconciliation and redemption for the other, different nature of finite, contradictory and mortal created beings, in order to concede them space in their eternal life to let them participate in their own joy. (pp. 151–152)

In short, the triune God is a personal relational divine being who is engaged in his people's lives.

The perichoretic nature of Christian salvation is affirmed by the fact that Christ is in the believers (Gl 2:20) and the believers are in Christ (Rm 8:1); the believers are in God who resides in them through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16). This means that the transcendent God is immanent in the believers and in the church through indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. However, the immanent God remains transcendent as the holy and eternal Other who is distinct and separate from human beings (Horton 2011:331).

In contrast, anointed objects impersonalise God by presenting him as not personally and directly involved in the affairs of his people. It distorts God's relational nature through which he participates in the affairs of humanity. The relationality of God essentially means that God is actively present in the life of the believers. That God is actively present in the life of the believers communicates the idea they should engage him directly as a personal being and not an impersonal mystical power.

## Towards a trinitarian relational response to Christian reliance on anointed objects

In light of God's trinitarian relational nature, what should be done to empower neo-Pentecostal Christians and other believers drawn to relying on anointed objects from the prophets to shun these articles and directly rely on God?

### Awakening Christians to their perichoretic relationship with God

A significant step towards empowering neo-Pentecostals to abandon their reliance on anointed objects is awakening them to the reality of the trinitarian perichoretic nature of their salvation. The Bible presents Christian salvation as a perichoretic trinitarian reality in which there is a symbiotic or interpenetrative union between the triune God and the believers, both at individual and church levels. Because soteriologically Christ is the entry point to a relationship with the Triune God, to encounter Christ is to ultimately encounter the Trinity. The Father is in Christ, and Christ is in the believers (Jn 14:10,20; Gl 2:10) and the believers are in Christ (Col 1:27; Eph 3:17); therefore, ultimately the believers are in the Triune God (2 Cor 13:14). Paul encouraged Corinthian Christians by asking them: '[d]o you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you?' (2 Cor 13:5). In this verse, Paul highlights the perichoretic nature of Christian salvation by presenting it as 'the reciprocal or mutual indwelling of Christ and believers: the Christ in whom believers live also lives in them, both individually and corporately' (Gorman 2001:38). Similarly, the Christian disciples are presented as tabernacled by the Holy Spirit, both as individual Christians (1 Cor 6:19–20) and corporately as the church (1 Cor 3:16–17). The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in each Christian disciple and in the corporate church is the way by which we experience the redemptive and reigning presence of the Triune God. After examining Paul's trinitarian perspective of Christian salvation, Fee (1996) concluded:

Salvation is an experienced reality, made so by the person of the Spirit coming into our lives. One simply cannot be a Christian in any Pauline sense without the effective work of the Trinity. (p. 44)

Therefore, Christians who rely on the anointed articles from African neo-Pentecostal ministers for intimate connection with God must reform their thinking by appreciating that as disciples of Christ, God's life is in them and their life is in God. Anointed objects are therefore not instruments of drawing closer to God, because God is already in the believers and reigning in them through the indwelling presence of the

Holy Spirit and the Word of God (Eph 3:17). The apostle Paul repeatedly calls Christians to awaken to this fact (Col 2:6) so that they will deepen their relationship with God and grow in their reliance on him. Indeed, there are remarkable differences between the nature of the perichoretic relations amongst the three persons of the Trinity and the nature of the perichoretic relation between God and the Christians (Webster 2006:150).

Within the three divine persons, there is equality and interdependence, whilst between the Triune God and the Christians and the church, the perichoretic relationship is that of the creator and creature. However, for finite and sinful humans to symbiotically participate in the life of the eternal, self-existing, independent God is a sign of God's commitment to preserve, save and glorify them 'so that they might attain their own creaturely integrity and perfection in fellowship with himself' (Webster 2006:150).

### The affirmation of the sufficiency of the personal mediatory role of Christ

The interpersonal relationality of the triune God raises the question of the sufficiency of the mediatory role of Jesus Christ, who is a personal being. At the centre of the neo-Pentecostal reliance on anointed objects is the question of the sufficiency of Jesus Christ to lead believers into the presence of God. The Bible presents Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity, where he qualified for this position by dying as a ransom sacrifice for all humanity (1 Tm 2:5–6). As the resurrected saviour who conquered death, Christ is enthroned at the right hand of the Father as Lord and Saviour (Ac 2:36) and mediator and high priest (Heb 2:17) saving and serving Christians. From a trinitarian perichoretic perspective, the significance of Jesus' mediatory role is that it is the personal God himself who brings humanity into a relationship with himself.

Says Torrance (1996):

In Jesus Christ God has revealed himself and given himself to us unreservedly in the fullness of his divine Reality, in such a way that what he reveals and gives to us is grounded in his ultimate Being as God. (p. 21)

Therefore, the mediatory role of Christ is essential because he is the reconciler of God and humanity, and it is only through him, the Incarnate God-human, that God brings lost sinners into a perichoretic union with him.

Neo-Pentecostals need to awaken to the sufficiency of Christ and affirm it. We have noted that the reliance on the anointed objects of the neo-Pentecostal ministers thrives on the role played by ministers in creating a huge gap between God and the ordinary believer that can only be closed by the ministers (Banda 2018:62–63; Biri 2012:6; Magezi & Banda 2017:2–4). It is further noted that neo-Pentecostal ministers impersonalise God and usurp Christ's personal mediatory role and undermine his atoning work on the cross and replace it with a quasi-magical religiosity that thrives on anointed objects to reach God (Banda 2019). To address the reliance on anointed

objects, Christ's personal mediatory role must be re-emphasised and neo-Pentecostals must be taught to connect with God through Christ exclusively.

### Teaching Christians to connect with God through personal relationships

A further significant step towards a trinitarian relational response to Christian reliance on anointed objects is to reaffirm the personality of God. This means that neo-Pentecostal Christians must be challenged to abandon impersonalised religiosity that relates to God as an impersonal being. Neo-Pentecostal believers need to realise that the use of anointed objects thrives on impersonalised religiosity. The reaffirmation of the personality of God means that God is to be treated as a being, and not an object or force to be used or manipulated (Erickson 1998:296). To treat God as a personal being and not as an object or force to be used or manipulated means that we must acknowledge his divine sovereignty, which emphasises God's independence and will that he exercises in accordance with his holiness, justness, love, goodness and faithfulness to his people. Accordingly, the (Erickson 1998):

[I]dea that God is simply something to be used to solve our problems and meet our needs is not religion. Such attempts to harness him belong rather to the realm of magic or technology. (p. 296)

In this, African neo-Pentecostals must reject and challenge the impersonalised ideas of God in African traditional religions (ATRs). African neo-Pentecostals tend to uncritically adopt the ATR impersonalised ideas of God and incorporate them into their theology. One of the aspects that neo-Pentecostals have incorporated from ATR is a form of worship as deal-making with God. Chirevo Kwenda (in Browning 2013) says 'African traditional religion is deal-making' to draw attention to the anthropocentric and utilitarian function of ATR. A close look at the various aspects in neo-Pentecostalism such as anointed objects, incantations and various special offerings portrays a system of 'deal-making' with God. All this violates God's personality and relationality.

The reaffirmation of the personality of God means recognising that God 'acts on his own initiative, rather than merely responding to events' (Frame 2002:25). This does not mean that God is unmoved in our situations of pain and suffering or the obedience of his people, but that he acts according to his integrity and righteousness, meaning that he cannot be manipulated by the use of anointed objects. The relationality of God challenges the impersonalised religiosity associated with the use of anointed objects and calls Christians to relational religiosity of personal faith with God.

Neo-Pentecostals may argue that oil is a biblically sanctioned object for healing because in Mark 6:13 it was used by the 12 disciples to heal the sick, and in James 5:14 the elders are instructed to pray for the sick and anoint them with oil. It is

difficult to agree with the position of the Reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther that the use of oil ended with the apostolic age, because James' instruction is to regular church officers and frames the instruction as a permanent church practice (Moo 1985:179). At the same time, it must be noted that in the New Testament the instruction to anoint a sick person is only mentioned in James and there were many people who were healed without being anointed with oil, showing that oil 'is not a necessary accompaniment to the prayer for healing' (Moo 1985:179). That many healings occurred without oil shows that the only aspect needed all the time is personal faith in God. McKnight (2011:440) highlighted the importance of noting that James 'instructs [Christians] to attend pastorally to the sick in prayer, and we need to recognise that intercessory prayer is the first thing he commands and is the main verb'. Furthermore, it must be noted that in James, anointing accompanies prayer, not vice versa, indicating that the primary element is prayer to God in faith. James' emphasis is not on the anointing, but the prayer of faith that is relational. Furthermore, any use of James 5:14 to insist on the neo-Pentecostal practice of anointing with oil must realise that the early church neither sold oil nor promoted it as a sacrament of the church as is the case in many neo-Pentecostal churches. The emphasis remains on relating with God and taping from him the resources needed for healing and all life's needs through relational faith. The Reformers rejected the use of icons and relics in Christian worship because the objects distorted the biblical principle of faith only as a means of reaching out to God and relating to him.

### Pursuing the relevance of God's perichoretic union with Africans in their unique African context

In the African context of poverty and suffering, an implication of awakening to the perichoretic union between Christians and the Triune God is the realisation of God's participation in unique African contextual issues.

Perichoresis affirms God's complete embrace of Africans within their unique African context. This challenges African Christians to seriously ponder on what it means to symbiotically share God's life and yet live in gripping fear of ancestors, evil and witchcraft, and other related fears. A serious problem in African Christianity is the persistent intense feeling that the God of the Bible is a white Western European deity and therefore foreign and irrelevant to unique African contextual issues. The growing contemporary tide for the decolonisation of religion in Africa at times portrays the God of the Bible as Western and foreign in Africa and therefore to be abandoned. In some respects, anointed substances from neo-Pentecostal prophets fuel the foreignness of God in Africa, resulting in syncretism, uncritically adopting and validating the African traditional religiosity informed by a pre-modern cosmology of a world ruled by capricious spirits. God's relationality with believers as depicted by perichoretic Triunity challenges African Christians to think about the sufficiency of the God of the Bible in their unique African context.



Reliance on the anointed objects is also driven by the quest to tap from God the miraculous power for wealth and prosperity. Incidentally, the feeling that the God of the Bible is foreign in Africa is also prompted by the subjugation and impoverishment of Africans by powerful Western nations and the rise in poverty and suffering in the continent. Jesus said that he came to bring abundant life (Jn 10:10), and instead of relying on anointed objects to fight battles with evil forces such as demons and witchcraft that are believed to bring poverty and hinder people from attaining material prosperity, African Christians need to reflect on the creative and developmental power of being indwelt by God. One of the major contributors to Africa's poverty is a consumeristic attitude that just wants to consume instead of a creative attitude, which promotes human agency, human responsibility and empowers Africans to exercise their God-given creative power to develop their economies. This will affirm the active presence of the Godhead in unique African contextual issues.

## Conclusion

The discussion above highlights the need for doctrinally thought through theological solutions to the African quest for intimacy with God. A serious problem with the African neo-Pentecostal use of anointed articles is that it is not sufficiently informed by the doctrine of the Trinity, which shows that God is an interpersonal relational being. Anointed objects therefore are unnecessary for biblically informed Christians because they attempt to mediate an already given relationality for every believer. Therefore, in response to the question, 'from a perspective of the relationality of God, how can we evaluate the reliance on the anointed objects to connect with God amongst African neo-Pentecostals?', it is pointed out that anointed articles in African neo-Pentecostalism thrive on a limited understanding of God's relationality, which is in his triune being. Neo-Pentecostal Christians and other Christians who are attracted to anointed mantles must understand their perichoretic union with God, in which God is in them and they are in him. The anointed objects impersonalise God and undermine his relationality by projecting him as an impersonal deity, which can be mastered and manipulated through rituals, incantations and magical objects. The Trinity affirms God as a relational God, and Christians must strive to grow and deepen their relationship with him through faith and personal obedience, not through mastering anointed objects.

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## Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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