

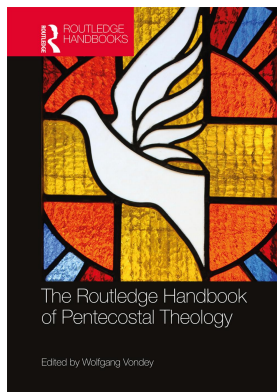
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PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

Material abundance and praxis of transformation

Andreas Heuser

Since its breakthrough within a distinct post-Second World War subculture of the North American Pentecostal movement, prosperity theology has become for many almost synonymous with global Pentecostalism. The so-called prosperity gospel seems to represent an ideal-type of “transnational transcendence” or a specific religious economy that “travels well” (Csordas 2009, 5). Transnational surveys from the first decade of the twenty-first century underline both the global spread and the design of an almost canonized corpus of theology (Pew 2006, 2010). The empirical findings suggest a remarkable success story of prosperity theology, both within global Christianity and within a short time span.

At the same time, prosperity theology signifies one of the most contentious concepts in contemporary global Christianity and is widely criticized and rejected by other parts of the Pentecostal movement. The concerns relate to the focus the prosperity gospel places on material wealth combined with physical and bodily well-being (see Chapter 24). Commonly also referred to as the gospel of “health and wealth,” prosperity theology crafts this-worldly success and individual well-being as outward signs of divine grace. Synonymous with a peculiar spiritual language of desire, it encodes speech acts surrounding victorious living and triumphant faith, miraculous wealth and fulfilled promises, righteous opportunities, and deserving health. In order to habitualize convictions of legitimate prosperity, it invites ritual practices of gift exchange. Communication about prosperity theology happens within non-hierarchical, horizontal rather than vertical networks of national and global interaction (see Christerson and Flory 2017). Single versions of prosperity theology are often nuanced by specified motifs and contextual modifications or express comparative distinctiveness in a competitive arena of prosperity ministries. Conceptual alterations caution awareness of a plurality of prosperity *theologies* (Attanasi 2012; Wariboko 2012).

Keeping in mind the descriptive diversity of local adaptations, this chapter reconstructs the basic hermeneutical design of prosperity theology. I argue that the evaluation of the prosperity message in Pentecostal theology demands careful attention to the historical genealogy, ecumenical critique, and widening ambitions of the prosperity movement. The bulk of the chapter presents the main theological trajectories with a focus on the genealogy of prosperity theology and the characteristic profile that is being transmitted, adjusted, and modified in local contexts. Thereafter follows a summary of theological critique against prosperity theology from acquainted biblical theological interventions to much less known ecumenical

perceptions. A significant emphasis is then placed on the socioeconomic relevance of prosperity theology. In a concluding remark, prosperity theology is staged in the wider discourse on the legitimacy of material wealth substantially engrained in a holistic concept of life in abundance.

A historical genealogy of prosperity theology

Although closely linked to Pentecostal theology, prosperity teaching embraces prior traditions of mind science and positive thinking as well as healing movements, mostly within Protestant milieus. The vanguards of the prosperity movement relate their message to the ministry of Kenneth Hagin (1917–2003), considered the seminal pioneer of the American Word of Faith movement. Hagin had an Assemblies of God background, yet the origins of the Word of Faith movement merged diverse theological strands ranging from Pentecostals, Holiness evangelicals, American Methodists, African-American Baptists, and Dutch Reformed Calvinists (Bowler 2013). Hagin's theology instructed believers in concrete steps to be taken to obtain the promised divine blessings. Profoundly driven by his autobiographical narrative on healing experiences (including dramatic accounts of near-death moments and hell rides), he presented himself as a systematic, Bible-based healing evangelist who refrained from sensationalist approaches to healing. Any believer, Hagin (1995) suggested, can potentially access the healing promises of Christ with the power and techniques of the mind. In his approach, Hagin was directly informed by the teachings of Essex William Kenyon (1867–1948), a Baptist minister considered a Word of Faith protagonist (McConnell 1988, 6–12). The American genealogy reaching back to Kenyon digs deep into a theological melting pot around the turn of the twentieth century that builds the foundation of contemporary Pentecostal prosperity teaching.

The traces of Kenyon's theology lead back to the Keswick holiness movement and the New Thought or mind sciences movement beginning with the 1880s. Kenyon's inspiration through the Keswick movement stood much in accordance with late nineteenth-century evangelicalism. The Keswick movement expressed evangelical piety with its emphasis on scriptural evidence, the authority of "new birth" experience, and the ensuing request for sanctification (see Chapter 22). In addition, it epitomized divine healing and so-called Higher Life teachings, which prioritized eradication of personal sin in order to access the inner richness of a God-fearing life. Kenyon fused Higher Life persuasions with the philosophical framework of the American New Thought movement.

Originating in the late nineteenth century, the New Thought movement is often overlooked in the historical survey of prosperity theology (Jones and Woodbridge 2011, 25–49; Bowler 2013, 11–40; Walton 2014). In line with various streams of contemporary mind sciences, the New Thought movement postulates the human potency to reach perfection in life through mind-power and constructive thought. In other words, it expresses the supremacy of thought over material substance. Thoughts enable and shape reality; ideas create or alter the physical world, and the mind ultimately controls bodily existence. One of the main characteristics of the New Thought movement was to present mental methods to transform thoughts into real-life matters. It conceptualized the enactment of ideas by invoking correct speech, or by articulating one's conviction in an effective way.

A key element in New Thought circles was to speak into existence material and physical well-being (Bowler 2013, 12–15). Since words generate reality, the repetition of words helps channel aspirations for life; the redundancies of speech advocate the change of conditions. A twin technique to demonstrate the power of thought was to visualize a higher status of

existence, and to radiate constructively around pursuits of success, accomplishment, and triumph in life. The reality of poverty and illness can be reconceptualized through images of prosperity and health. The recurring concept is that mental desire predates material ownership. The manifestation of success relies on transforming thought concepts of life. Lastly, ideas actualize only when pronounced with an authority of self-assurance. New Thought insisted on resolute faith in oneself to achieve success. By consequence, sceptical belief accounts for destructive life experiences; negative attitudes towards life obstruct alternative visions of one's existence. In sum, the New Thought movement exemplified the legitimacy of human desire for material success and underscored life-changing values of confidence, self-help, and optimism.

Kenyon (1943) contributed to the predominantly philosophical genre of New Thought by transmitting the mind science convictions into biblical language. In his reading, a believer can gain perfection in faith through the power of thinking. Hagin presented Kenyon's core ideas by paying credit to the linguistic prerogative: the power of thought has to be expressed in words to make it a real power of life. Thought experience is coupled with linguistic expression, or the "power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). The concept of a religious speech act that creates reality relates to biblical accounts of divine declarations of the material world (see Genesis 1; John 1). Hagin stressed the importance of God's spoken "word" to alter positive thinking. This emphasis gave way to innovative faith concepts: by alluding to scriptural references (e.g. Prov. 23:7), New Thought transformed positive thinking into faith language: positive thinking is now combined with the power of confession—if I want to activate desired benefits of faith, I need to bespeak constructive thinking. This belief in the power of the word has also been critically described as the "naming-and claiming" act of positive confession.

Prosperity theology developed New Thought teaching along a Christological trajectory. In order to tap the rich resources of faith and positive confession, a believer has to explore the "Christ in you" or develop a "Christ-consciousness." This Christological variant of the New Thought movement, developed in the Unity School of American Christianity around the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasizes the Christ-principle or the idea of an indwelling God rather than the historical figure of Jesus. In positive confession, a believer acclaim "a Christ potentiality, which professes a capacity for persons to attain unity with the higher self" (Walton 2014, 459).

From this potentiality outwards, confessions of faith generate positive existence evidenced in prosperous living (often citing 3 John 1:2). A prosperous living is seen to be in accordance with divine will, and conversely, a life of misery, poverty, and illness is inconsistent with God's plan of life and signifies an impoverished faith. Prosperity theology claims well-being as divine promise in the double sense of health and of material wealth in the here and now (Jones and Woodbridge 2011, 53). Furthermore, positive confession privileges the contractual dimension of faith. Hagin referred to it as the "law of faith" (see Bowler 2013, 44–46). The contracted bond of faith engages a cause-and-effect relationship between a believer and God: faith activates a dynamic of divine promise and fulfilment, and God is bound to obligate the request of faith.

Prosperity theology might be defined as a "legal spiritual system" (Bowler 2013, 46). Hagin (1995) excelled in teaching the practical steps to virtually command blessings from God, which he termed the "keys" to receiving acts of grace. The set of "keys" encapsulates all sorts of positive confessions in terms of biblical references to material blessings and instructions on how to keep the sonship of God in obedience to God's word. However, there is another side to this contractual understanding of faith: the contract can be broken by

human free will. Just like the cause of prosperity is spiritual, the cause of poverty is spiritual. In the final sense, poverty is not defined by the absence of material wealth; it is rather defined by disobedience to God and as consequence of sin. The aim of prosperity theology is to reinstate the contractual relationship with God that opens the way to divine blessings again.

In other words, the curse of poverty can be wiped off a personal record with a strong positioning of the “law of faith” (Bowler 2013, 46). Attached to this “law of faith” is the extreme notion often identified as “seed-faith,” which projects manifold concrete blessings of grace as the divine promise of abundant life. It has gained enormous popularity within the prosperity movement. The concept outlines a spiritual economy of investing and gaining in profits, also designed as an imperative of “sowing and reaping.” The origin of the concept lies in a fund-raising project conducted in the 1950s by Oral Roberts (Tulsa, Oklahoma), an early adopt of Hagin to start his religious broadcasting enterprise (Walton 2014, 464). Seed-faith expects divine blessing in connection with giving financial means to God (sic!) and the church: the more you sow the more you will reap. In prosperity circles, the multiplying divine grace is expected to return obligations at least tenfold. The seed-faith complex thus calculates the outcome of a successful life “making material reality the measure of the success of immaterial faith” (Bowler 2013, 7). The praxis of sowing and reaping is connected to often elaborate rituals of “gift” exchange. Postures on divine giving and of tithing characterize a new style of Pentecostal prosperity worship.

An ecumenical critique of prosperity theology

Prosperity theology has come under stark theological critique, with unambiguous interventions from two disciplines, biblical exegesis and ecumenical studies. Biblical scholars express particular concerns about hermeneutical and methodological aspects of prosperity teaching. Many New Testament scholars see the emphasis on material wealth as a non-negotiable indicator of incoherence with wider biblical teachings. New Testament scholar Werner Kahl (2007, 22) defies the preoccupation with material success as an essential trope and argues that “the idolisation of individual business success as divine blessing undermines Gospel values.” He categorizes prosperity theology with its selective use of Scripture as advertisement of consumerist materialism and “unbiblical ideology” (Kahl 2007, 22; 2015).

Such criticism formulated in biblical studies also informed systematic theological assessments of prosperity theology at large. Critics across theological traditions converge on the a-historical composition of prosperity theology. Scholarly discourse unanimously disapproves of the non-contextual and selective usage of biblical passages by prosperity theologians (Amanze 2011; Jones and Woodbridge 2011; Yong 2011; Mtata 2013; Agana 2015; Asamoah-Gyadu 2015). Yet, despite such solid criticism, the magnetism of prosperity theology has remained strong throughout global Christianity. In turn, in contemporary ecumenical discourse, prosperity theology has attracted theological comments from all of the main church bodies, and again, the overall reception of prosperity theology bears a counter-critical tone. A closer look into recent declarations of the Lausanne Movement, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Roman Catholic Church discloses the ecumenical perception of the core commitments and impact of prosperity theology.

The Cape Town Commitment

Among the three ecumenical bodies, it is only the Lausanne Movement that directly engaged in detail with prosperity theology with the clearest anti-prosperity theology sentiments.

This critical discussion is found in its latest united statement, the so-called Cape Town Commitment titled “A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action,” which crafts the current roadmap of the Lausanne Movement. This joint commitment of evangelicals globally rejects prosperity theology as an aberration of the Christian faith. In contrast, the Cape Town Commitment (2011) puts strong emphasis on values of humility, integrity, and simplicity, summarized as the so-called HIS-strategy as the ultimate guideline for action. In an almost dualistic divide, prosperity theology is classified in the field of adversaries to biblical truth, close to representing cardinal sins of pride, power, and greed. The Cape Town Commitment (no. 91) affirms “that there is a biblical vision of human prospering,” but it categorizes the praxis of “naming-and-claiming” material blessings as false teaching and denies “as unbiblical the teaching that spiritual welfare can be measured in terms of material welfare, or that wealth is always a sign of God’s blessing.” Contrary to the HIS-strategy, the obsession-like aspirations of material wealth can easily promote idolatry, and “wealth can often be obtained by oppression, deceit or corruption.” In the same paragraph, the Cape Town Commitment defies the contractual law-of-faith construction of prosperity theology: “We also deny that poverty, illness or early death are always a sign of God’s curse, or evidence of lack of faith, or the result of human curses, since the Bible rejects such simplistic explanations.”

The Cape Town Commitment is clear in its resolute refusal of prosperity theology. The rejection is based primarily on moral grounds. Prosperity theology cultivates the “idolatry of greed” that opposes the integrity of faith as understood in evangelical theology. The fact that the Lausanne Movement covers prosperity theology in long and intense passages shows its widespread impact on evangelical Christianity. Internally, this impact is seen as a critically divisive factor for the cohesion of evangelicalism (Biehl 2015, 137). The devotees to prosperity theology are urged to return to the correct biblical vision of prosperity related to the core moral values that run throughout the Commitment. Yet this mandate allows space for ambiguity: on the one hand, moral reasoning criticises the explanatory capacity of the contractual faith complex; the Cape Town Commitment accuses any marginalization of people as a consequence of weak faith. Implicitly it questions the causality of poor faith and poor fate, i.e. the conviction that the poor and vulnerable are self-responsible for their situation. On the other hand, the strategy disconnects societal anomalies of corruption or oppression from relations of power. Consequently, the transformation of society may happen through cognitive acts of individual repentance. Therefore, the rediscovery of biblical visions of prosperity is followed by moral codes of behaviour, as against a disproportionate emphasis on material orientation.

Together towards life

A contrasting view on prosperity theology is offered by declarations of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the ecumenical body of mainly historic Protestant and Orthodox churches. In its latest mission statement, “Together towards Life” (Keum 2013), the WCC reflects about “Life in Abundance.” The theme suggests a direct line to prosperity theology, yet also refers to long-established WCC discourses on the “Economy of Life.” This text is only the second WCC statement on mission and offers an actual mapping of global Christianity, which pays credit, more detailed than in the previous statement, to the rise and faces of Pentecostalism. This attention is amplified by the pneumatological turn in mission theology (see Chapter 26), echoed in the key codes of the statement which bind together “Spirit” and “life.” Together towards Life can indeed be interpreted as a feature of the pentecostalization phase of WCC history.

The mission statement immediately alludes to John 10:10 by claiming that “affirming life in all its fullness is Jesus Christ’s ultimate concern and mission.” Abundant life evolves as core characteristic of the whole document, and the emphasis is placed on the fullness of life in the here and now. At the same time, the first paragraph states that the denial of life to people “is a rejection of the God of life” (no. 1). The statement deliberates about such denial of life in terms of social injustice or political exclusion from participation in public life; by mentioning caste systems, enslavements and racism, and religiously defined denials of life. The criterion for discernment in mission is solidarity with “oppressed people... broken communities and the restoration of the whole creation” (no. 102). The WCC statement avoids mentioning the term prosperity theology; however, the text unmistakably challenges prosperity teachings as an integral ideological part of the neoliberal market economy, which it diagnoses as an idolatrous system (see Chapter 34). The discussion of prosperity appears in the analysis of the “global system of mammon” that protects the wealth of the rich and powerful and stands “in direct opposition” to the reign of God (no. 31). From the perspective of the WCC, the formative elements of prosperity theology, its positive confessions of material blessings, and its “seed” claims of investing and harvesting stand in accordance with the dominant market ideology. In clear rejection of these priorities of prosperity theology, the statement concludes: “Mission, then, is to denounce the economy of greed and to participate in and practice the divine economy of love, sharing and justice” (no. 108). The “empire of mammon” can be dethroned by its victims, dominantly the poor and marginalized people. In response, the concept of “mission from the margins” transforms the prior notion of the “preferential option for the poor” used in WCC documents since the 1980s. “We must turn our direction of mission to the actions that the marginalized are taking. Justice, solidarity, and inclusivity are key expressions of mission from the margins” (no. 107). Together towards Life credits the “voices from the margins” with authority to discern life-affirming from life-destroying processes.

In sum, the WCC operates with a justice idiom to designate life in fullness. Abundance of life is defined from the margins in order to allow for full participation in life. The justice idiom embraces solidarity and social inclusiveness; but life in fullness also carries a concern for the integrity of creation. The longing for individual material success expressed by prosperity theology reduces the biblical sense of life in fullness to anthropomorphic, individualistic, and materialistic coinage of life in material wealth. Prosperity theology thus legitimates the empire of mammon rather than expressing divine grace. If the Cape Town Commitment criticizes the contractual nature of belief that marginalizes the poor and vulnerable, these “margins” remain more vaguely connoted in the WCC statement. Together towards Life speaks from a position of privileged observation about the margins: it takes the position of churches “in solidarity with” but not of the “churches of the marginalized themselves” (Biehl 2015, 144).

Gaudium Evangelii

The third document to be mentioned here is the papal exhortation *Gaudium Evangelii* (2013). Right from the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis proclaimed a church for the poor as his ecclesiological vision. This vision is manifest in his first official declaration. Prosperity theology figures again as a theological antipode to the church for the poor. “The culture of prosperity deadens us” (no 54). *Gaudium Evangelii* explicitly deals with prosperity theology as “nothing more than a form of self-centredness” and emphasizes the “growing attraction to various forms of a ‘spirituality of well-being’ divorced from any community life, or to a ‘theology of prosperity’ detached from responsibility for our brothers and sisters” (no. 91).

Pope Francis categorizes global capitalism as an “economy of exclusion” so that “those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but the outcast, the ‘leftovers’” (no. 53). The longing for material wealth replicates “the idolatry of money... lacking a truly human purpose” (no. 55) and without limits signals the reality of a “deified market” (no. 56). From this perspective, prosperity theology can only be interpreted as a theological guise reducing human beings to “one of his needs alone: consumption” (no. 55). In contrast, the church for the poor is authentic when addressing the structural causes of poverty and inequality and when pursuing the common good (nos. 202; 203). *Gaudium Evangelii* classifies prosperity theology as a fragment in a fetishized economy of exclusion. Acts of positive confession of success drastically delimit human dignity to egocentric consumerism and social blindness.

In conclusion, the framing of prosperity theology in all three ecumenical positions highlights similar theological concerns. The Lausanne Movement favours a moral reading with a focus on individual behavioural transformation. The WCC and the papal declaration apply a structural reading aligned with liberation theological and Marxist insights exposing unjust and asymmetrical systems of dependency. These documents attack global capitalism as a deified market economy. All ecumenical positions share a theological concern for the de-eschatologizing texture of prosperity theology; its this-worldly orientation; and the prominence of the here and now as the primary, if not only, concern of life. In addition, the documents strongly criticize the dualistic imagery of prosperity theology, either in the personalized separation of those blessed or cursed, or in the spatial configuration of the kingdom of God and the empire of mammon: prosperity theology is located in an empire of mammon—individual claims for material blessings are in far distance from divine grace.

The socioeconomics of contemporary prosperity theology

Prosperity theology has attracted significant interdisciplinary scholarship for representing both “a *practical* and instrumental form” of Pentecostalism (Harrison 2005, 148, original italics). Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong (2012, 16) identified the practical design of prosperity theology as key to a highly productive “religious economy.” In turn, numerous case-studies have profiled a wide range of the socioeconomic strata of prosperity theology, adapted to diverse scenarios of social change (see Maxwell 1998; Attanasi and Yong 2012; Freeman 2012). However, the socioeconomic script of prosperity theology remains ambiguous and feeds ongoing controversial debate. In line with the widespread ecumenical critique, the strongest theological criticism is raised from a Social Gospel perspective. In this view, the theological emphasis of prosperity teaching on the translation of matters of the “here-and-now” into Christian life only generates a “spiritual platform” for neoliberal ideology (Augustine 2011; cf. Gifford 2015b). Embedded in a “seductive, hypnotic” aura of “materialistic leanings,” prosperity theology offers “a private password to personal affluence” that amalgamates all biblical mandates of social engagement “into a mess of conservative pottage” (Sanders 2011, 144–45). Most poignantly, prosperity theology crafts its own theological message in the form of a “prosperity gospel”—a phrase often used in critical distance to the teachings of the movement, especially by Pentecostals. The social capital of the prosperity gospel comes under scrutiny specifically in view of the culture of Pentecostal megachurches. Critics observe the emergence of business empires led by “prophets for profit” (Ukah 2013). The “monetary turn” of business-minded religious entrepreneurs has been described as a Pentecostal kleptocracy operating in an intransparent mode of a “sacred secrecy” around finances (Ukah 2005, 272).

Yet prosperity theological parameters and ethical values invite for a counter-reading as well. Prosperity theology's material economy of blessing can have immense effects on processes of social transformation (Heuser 2016). Such constructive ethos of prosperity theology emerges from a "long tradition of self-help and mutual aid" (Harrison 2005, 146). By eliminating the rift between God and "mammon," the prosperity message energizes capabilities of coping, overcoming, and desire otherwise often suppressed by Pentecostal concerns for a sanctified life. Core themes within prosperity theology are related to self-esteem and self-confidence, to self-discipline and an enchanted kind of Protestant work ethic (see Dickow 2012; Drønen 2015). In this sense, prosperity theology can help reconstruct notions of the self and emphasizes self-reliance and individual agency. Together, these empowering notions have contributed to the success of the prosperity message in tandem with the Pentecostal orientation towards a redeemed and empowered life.

In this light, prosperity theology translates into a social technique adaptable to different social contexts and milieus. In entrepreneurial environments, prosperity theology may strategize also a kind of management Christianity, turning business concepts into projects of church reform, whereas urban-based "progressive Pentecostalism" is pooling community resources for investments in social outreach projects (Miller and Yamamori 2007). In contexts of urban marginalization, prosperity theology unfolds its transformative impulses in a (slum-) theology of survival (Heuser 2013); a theology of waiting and trusting helps to overcome disillusionment and unsteadiness in times of international migration and integration (Rey 2015). In education-sensitive contexts, we also find transnational educational cooperation between prosperity gospel ministries (Daniels 2015). More recently, prosperity ministries circulating in global networks seek credibility through the fusion with a dominion-theological frame of social analysis. Prosperity theology expands its visionary resources from individual wealth to national development programmes (Heuser 2019).

This range of options illustrates that the gatekeepers of prosperity theology see themselves as promoters of an intentional sociopolitical transformation. It indicates the possibility of a reform of the original vision of prosperity transcending from the erstwhile impetus on personal faith to concerns of poverty alleviation and socioeconomic development in varied patterns. Prosperity theology detracts from prospects of wealth for an elite faithful to embrace notions of the common good. Importantly, alongside the conceptual extension to a broader, even global arena of social transformation, prosperity theology is expanding its reductionist materialism to an awareness of the more profound ambivalences of life.

Conclusion

Prosperity theology claims a perplexing career. Historically, broadly prefigured in American holiness traditions adhering to an ascetic ethos, prosperity theology unfolds an unprecedented impetus on personal material wealth as divine right of believers. The history of religious materialism within African American Christianity in the twentieth century combines passages from survival to concepts of better living and Christian capitalism (Harrison 2005, 130–46).

Coined in mixed theological milieus in the post-Second World War era, prosperity theology amends theological formats to be recognized as a potential gatekeeper to social transformation in postcolonial global Christianity. At the start of the twenty-first century, prosperity theology has entered trans-religious discourses on success and wealth (Zakaria 2015; Heuser 2015b). The trans-religious osmosis of conceptual aspects, popular imagery, and ritual practices liaised with a theological message of prosperity designates new and emerging "religio-scapes" of the prosperity gospel (Heuser 2015a).

Despite its popular success, the prosperity message belongs to the “unresolved questions” in the salvific economy of Christianity, and Pentecostalism in particular, with its emphasis on the material provision of success and prosperity as a burning issue for “the church as a whole” (Anderson 2004, 162). Walter Hollenweger (2004), whose definition of early Pentecostalism as prefiguring the emancipatory movements of the twentieth century because of their sensitivity towards the people and themes at the margins of society set the tone for understanding global Pentecostalism, interrogates with a bitter note whether contemporary expressions of the Pentecostal movement are forgetting about their past. In a geopolitical era of sustainability, the emphasis on material wealth in the here and now questions traditional biblical as well as philosophical and global socioeconomic perspectives. Political philosophy supports the legitimacy of individual wealth but disputes unrestrained prosperity as a serious social problem (see Chapter 40). In the theory of justice, the question of material wealth is linked to a vision of society that enables and sustains a life in fullness and self-esteem for all, yet unrestricted wealth contradicts the urgent global challenges of poverty alleviation, climate change, and economic crises (Neuhäuser 2018).

The narrative of prosperity theology is rightly criticized for its reductionist view on material abundance, thus negating the many broader complexities of life and the moral problem of wealth. Yet recent redefinitions of materialism in prosperity theology begin to approach global experiences of suffering, poverty, alienation, and the denial of access to social resources more intensely than before. Prosperity theology remains convincing for individual believers in times of plenty. At the same time, re-signified from an individualistic image of material betterment into a holistic praxis of transformation, prosperity theology can stabilize wider aspirations of hope and carry expectations of coping with misery. Whether actual criteria of a sustainable life are already involved in the shaping of prosperity theology or not, as a concept it is open to narrow the gap to a more holistic notion of life in fullness.

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