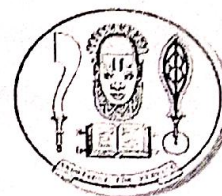




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A PHILOSOPHICAL LOOK AT MIRACLES AND MAGIC IN AFRICA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Existing scholarly debate within the Christian faith have interrogated conceptual clarifications on miracle and magic. While some of these arguments contend that miracle and magic are almost synonymous, other studies have remarked that a thin line of demarcation exist between these concepts. Although most studies within the Christian faith have criminalized magic, this study notes that magic and miracle are concepts that should be interrogated from an eclectic view point. To respond to the debate around magic and miracle, this study adopted the religious, philosophical and social paradigms to examine the distinction between magic and miracle with specific illustrations from the bible. The specific questions the study asks are: what is the relationship between magic and miracles? What are the biblical injunctions around miracle and magic? What are the implications of the use of magic and miracle for the 21st century Christian faith? Responding to these questions requires a contextualization of miracles and magic in the Christian faith. In Nigeria for example, there seems to be persistent abuse of these concepts by Christians. Some Christians have deployed magic and miracle to pursue selfish interest. For data, the encounter between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh's magicians as recorded in Exodus Chapters four to ten were subjected to qualitative evaluation. The study recommends that Christians should recognize the supremacy of God in his acts and deed. In addition, the Christian should also be weary of manipulators who institute magical powers in a bid to convince otherwise.

Keywords : Africa, Philosophical Perspective, Miracles and Magic, Nigerian Church

Introduction

In contemporary Nigeria, religious practices intertwine closely with the concepts of miracles and magic. These phenomena, often seen as transcending natural laws, play significant roles in the spiritual and cultural lives of many Nigerians. This study seeks to explore the distinctions and overlaps between miracles and magic from a religious and philosophical perspective, focusing on the implications for the church in Nigeria. Miracles are generally perceived as divine interventions, with an omnipotent deity performing acts beyond human capability, often as a demonstration of divine will and benevolence (Afolabi, 2021). In Christian

tradition, miracles have deep roots in biblical narratives, such as those of Jesus Christ and the early church, and they continue to be fundamental to the faith (Keener, 2011). In contrast, magic is often viewed skeptically, involving the manipulation of supernatural forces to achieve personal outcomes. Practices associated with magic, such as traditional African spiritual systems, witchcraft, and occult rituals, are often seen as contrary to mainstream religious teachings, especially in Christianity (Blaine, 2002; Neale, 1997).

In Nigeria, the distinction between miracles and magic is frequently blurred, influenced by indigenous traditions and Pentecostal Christianity's emphasis on

divine acts and the Holy Spirit's power (Oluwafemi, 2022). This creates a complex interplay between miracles, often seen as divine, and magical practices, which may be considered superstitious or heretical. From an eclectic perspective, analyzing the cultural, theological, and sociological aspects of these phenomena provides a comprehensive understanding of their significance in Nigerian society. It also encourages reflection on the church's role in guiding believers through these intricate religious dynamics. For the Nigerian church, this issue is critical. Positioned as both a spiritual and social authority, the church must navigate challenges like syncretism, where elements of traditional practices merge with Christian beliefs. Additionally, in a society facing socio-economic hardships, the appeal of miracles or magical solutions can be strong, necessitating a church response that addresses both spiritual and material needs. Interrogating the relationship between miracles and magic can help the church fulfill its mission by fostering a faith grounded in spiritual truth and practical action.

Scholarly debates within Christianity have interrogated whether miracles and magic are synonymous or distinctly different (Iwuagwu, 2023). Some argue that magic and miracles are manipulated for selfish purposes, leading to ambiguity, especially in Nigeria (Okoye, 2020). By exploring biblical texts, such as the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus, this study contends that miracles are divine acts intended to glorify God, while magic is driven by human or demonic forces for self-glorification (Twelftree, 1999; Pandey, 2023). The study concludes that the church must help believers distinguish between these concepts, recognizing the supremacy of God while being cautious of manipulative practices. By engaging with these issues, the church can better guide its followers in embracing a faith that is authentic, inclusive, and grounded in divine truth.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the relationship between miracles and magic from both religious and cultural perspectives, particularly within the 21st-century Christian faith. The objectives include examining the rationale behind miracles and magic, investigating biblical teachings concerning both phenomena, identifying their implications for contemporary Christian belief, and contextualizing them within Christian practices. These objectives aim to deepen understanding of how miracles and magic are perceived and practiced, especially in Nigerian Christianity, where both concepts influence spiritual life.

Conceptual Clarification

Miracle:

A miracle is an extraordinary event that surpasses natural laws, often attributed to divine intervention (Afolabi, 2021). In religious contexts, especially within Abrahamic faiths like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, miracles are seen as acts of God that demonstrate divine power, affirm faith, and reveal purpose. Biblical miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea or the healing miracles of Jesus, are seen as purposeful divine actions meant to reinforce faith, validate prophets, and illustrate God's benevolence. Miracles are supernatural occurrences that cannot be explained by science or nature and serve to benefit others, illustrating God's direct involvement in human affairs.

Magic:

In contrast, magic refers to human practices aimed at harnessing supernatural forces for specific outcomes. Unlike miracles, magic involves human agency in rituals, spells, or incantations to control or invoke these powers (Iwuagwu, 2023). Magic includes practices like witchcraft, sorcery, and divination, often viewed with suspicion within monotheistic religions, where it may be associated with heresy or demonic influences. However, magic plays an essential role in many traditional

African cultures, blending healing, divination, and ritualistic practices. Unlike miracles, which are attributed to divine will, magic is seen as human manipulation of supernatural forces.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in **Social Constructionism Theory**, as formulated by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. This sociological theory posits that reality is constructed through social interactions, where people create and sustain their understanding of the world through cultural and social factors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Applying this to the Nigerian Church, the beliefs in miracles and magic are shaped by a blend of African traditional religion and Christian teachings, where both coexist to form a unique understanding of supernatural phenomena.

In Nigerian Christianity, miracles are externalized through religious rituals, sermons, and texts. Over time, these beliefs become objectified, seen as part of objective reality, and internalized by members of the community. Similarly, traditional African beliefs in magic are also objectified through practices like divination and charms, influencing how miracles are interpreted. The theory highlights how Nigerian Christians interpret biblical miracles through cultural understandings of magic, creating a distinctive religious experience.

Rationale Between Miracles and Magic

Miracles and magic can be distinguished based on their source, intent, morality, and theological context. In Christianity, miracles are acts of divine intervention that serve a higher spiritual purpose, often seen in Jesus' healings or control over nature (Twelftree, 1999). These acts are compassionate and aimed at benefiting others, emphasizing divine love and the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity. On the other hand, magic is often associated with human intent, manipulation, and

personal gain, raising ethical questions especially within religious frameworks where it is seen as contrary to divine will (Blaine, 2002).

This study provides a nuanced understanding of miracles and magic within Christian and Nigerian cultural contexts. By employing Social Constructionism, it offers insights into how these concepts are interpreted and institutionalized, revealing the ecclesial nature of religious belief in Nigeria. This understanding helps elucidate the implications of miracles and magic for 21st-century Christian faith, especially in maintaining doctrinal purity while acknowledging cultural influences.

Investigating Biblical Injunctions Concerning Miracles and Magic

The interpretation of miracles and magic in biblical contexts is shaped by cultural, religious, and theological factors. In Christian theology, the actions of Jesus, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, and controlling nature, are regarded as miracles—divine acts demonstrating God's power and Jesus' authority. Miracles are supernatural occurrences that surpass natural laws, intended to reinforce Jesus' identity as the Messiah and convey divine love, compassion, and the fulfillment of God's kingdom (Wright, 2003; Twelftree, 1999). These events are essential to the Christian narrative, affirming Jesus' divinity and mission. In contrast, magic is generally viewed negatively in religious contexts, especially in Christianity. While "magic" might involve supernatural elements similar to miracles, it is often associated with practices outside religious authority and seen as manipulative or self-serving. The Bible itself includes examples of events that might be interpreted as magic by some but are considered divine miracles by others. For instance, Moses parting the Red Sea (Exodus 14), Elijah calling down fire from heaven (1 Kings 18), and Elisha making an axe head float (2 Kings 6) are acts demonstrating divine

power but could be seen as magical under a different interpretive lens.

In the modern context, magic is often described as a means of manipulating supernatural forces for personal gain or influence, whereas miracles are acts of divine will aligned with God's purpose. The Bible contains warnings against magic and sorcery, such as the magicians in Pharaoh's court (Exodus 7-8), Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8), and Elymas the Sorcerer (Acts 13). These narratives highlight the contrast between divine miracles and practices of magic or sorcery, which are seen as attempts to harness supernatural powers outside of God's authority. The theological distinction between miracles and magic underscores the difference between divine intervention and human attempts to control or manipulate spiritual forces. While miracles are seen as acts of compassion and authority from God, magic is often viewed as an illegitimate attempt to influence the supernatural. The interpretation of these phenomena depends on one's cultural and religious context, making it a subject of varying perspectives across different traditions.

Implication of Magic and Miracles for the Christian Faith

Magic has historically raised controversies and emotions, as it is rooted in the mysterious and the supernatural. From the illusions of stage magicians to ancient rituals, magic represents a range of practices, often viewed skeptically within Christianity. Magic is sometimes understood as a form of supernatural power that defies natural laws, involving spell-casting, enchantments, or rituals aimed at personal gain or influence. In contrast, miracles are seen as acts of divine intervention for the benefit of others, aligned with God's will (Blaine, 2002; Jay, 2008). Religious responses to magic vary significantly. Some traditions accept practices that might be considered magical as legitimate expressions of faith, such as prayers or rituals. However, Christianity

generally rejects magic, particularly when associated with occult practices. The Bible contains prohibitions against sorcery, viewing it as incompatible with faith. Despite these distinctions, there are instances where magic and religion have been intertwined in syncretic practices, blending elements of both. In contemporary times, magic takes on various forms, ranging from entertainment (stage illusions) to occult practices (rituals and spell-casting) and spiritual movements (such as New Age beliefs). The prevalence of magic varies depending on cultural and religious factors. In entertainment, magicians use illusions and sleight of hand to create wonder, while in some spiritual contexts, magic is part of rituals for healing or protection. In contrast, scientific rationalism often leads to skepticism toward supernatural claims.

In conclusion, the Christian faith emphasizes a clear distinction between divine miracles and practices of magic. Miracles are seen as manifestations of God's will, demonstrating divine power and compassion, while magic is often viewed as incompatible with Christian teachings due to its perceived manipulation of supernatural forces for personal purposes. This distinction is critical for maintaining the integrity of Christian doctrine and faith. The interpretation of both miracles and magic continues to be shaped by cultural, religious, and individual perspectives.

Contextualizing Miracle and Magic in the Christian Faith

In Christian contexts, the distinction between miracles and magic is a significant subject of discussion across various denominations. Orthodox and traditional Christian groups typically reject practices associated with magic, especially those perceived as occult or invoking supernatural forces outside the Christian understanding of God (Blaine, 2002). For these denominations, magic is often viewed as incompatible with Christian

teachings. Mainstream Protestantism varies in its stance; some denominations may accept certain cultural practices or symbolic rituals that might be seen as magical, while others maintain a more conservative stance. The Catholic Church, as a global institution, encompasses diverse perspectives. While officially discouraging occult practices, certain cultural expressions of faith—such as folk traditions—may incorporate elements considered magical. However, the Church makes a clear distinction between acceptable religious practices and forbidden occult activities. Charismatic and Pentecostal Christian communities tend to be more open to supernatural phenomena like miracles, spiritual gifts, and divine interventions. Some within these movements may view practices labeled as "magic" by others as expressions of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit (Neale, 1997).

The acceptance of magic among individual Christians often depends on personal beliefs, cultural background, and interpretations of biblical teachings. Some engage in practices seen as magical by others, while others strictly reject them. The term "magic" itself can have varied meanings, and whether it is accepted or rejected depends on how it aligns with one's understanding of Christian faith. While some believers are open to cultural expressions involving rituals, others remain skeptical if these practices contradict biblical teachings. Scholars from fields such as anthropology, sociology, and religious studies have explored the concept of magic across cultures. Notable figures include James Frazer, whose work *"The Golden Bough"* examined magic's role in early societies; Marcel Mauss, who emphasized the social aspects of magic; and Bronisław Malinowski, who studied its cultural functions. Other scholars, such as Mircea Eliade, Carlo Ginzburg, and Brian P. Levack, have examined magic's historical, religious, and psychological dimensions.

Ultimately, magic, in its various forms, continues to captivate human imagination by reflecting our attraction to the mysterious and transcendent (Panda, 2023). It mirrors humanity's quest for wonder and connection with forces beyond comprehension, embodying the tension between the known and the unknown, the rational and the mysterious. Whether embraced or rejected, magic reflects the diverse ways in which we navigate the profound mysteries of existence.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of the biblical encounter between Moses, Aaron, and Pharaoh's magicians, as recorded in Exodus 4-10, presents a rich comparison of divine miracles and human magic, with broader implications for the Church in Nigeria. Through four key excerpts, the power of God is contrasted with the abilities of Egyptian magicians, highlighting the limits of human sorcery and emphasizing the supremacy of divine intervention.

Excerpt One: The Rods Turned into Serpents (Exodus 7:10-12)

Aaron's rod, transformed into a serpent, demonstrates God's sovereign power. Pharaoh's magicians mimic this miracle using enchantments, but Aaron's serpent swallows their rods, illustrating divine superiority. This passage highlights the ability of occult powers to imitate divine acts, but God's power is ultimately transformative and sovereign, as emphasized by Keener (2011). The narrative challenges the Nigerian Church to discern between miracles that reflect God's power and those that arise from occult practices. It calls for a focus on spiritual authenticity, rejecting syncretism—where traditional magical practices and Christianity coexist—and affirming God's true miracles. Twelftree (1999) and Okoye (2020) argue for the importance of distinguishing between genuine miracles and counterfeit spiritual acts, urging the Church to rely on the Holy Spirit's power.

Excerpt Two: Water Turned to Blood (Exodus 7:20-22)

Moses and Aaron's act of turning the Nile into blood, commanded by God, symbolizes divine judgment over Egypt. The magicians replicate the act, but their power lacks divine purpose. This example reiterates that human sorcery can imitate divine actions, but the source and intent differ. Oluwafemi (2022) stresses that the Church must distinguish between God's true miracles and magical imitations. The passage speaks to the need for doctrinal clarity and spiritual discernment in the Nigerian Church, where traditional beliefs and Christianity often blur. Educating believers on the biblical differences between miracles and magic is essential to uphold the integrity of Christian faith.

Excerpt Three: The Plague of Frogs (Exodus 8:6-7)

Aaron's command over the frogs marks another demonstration of God's power, which the magicians imitate. However, their replication lacks the divine authority and purpose that underpins God's miracles. This distinction, supported by Iwuagwu (2023), highlights the need for the Church in Nigeria to foster discernment and educate believers on the true nature of God's miraculous power. The passage reinforces the necessity of rejecting syncretism, emphasizing the superiority of divine miracles over human enchantments. Okoye (2020) argues that the Church must equip believers to recognize counterfeit spiritual practices, fostering trust in God's true power.

Excerpt Four: The Plague of Lice (Exodus 8:17-19)

In this turning point, Aaron's striking of the dust to bring forth lice marks the magicians' inability to replicate the miracle, leading them to acknowledge, "This is the finger of God." This recognition of divine power, supported by Keener (2011) and Twelftree (1999),

demonstrates the limits of human magic. For the Nigerian Church, this passage underscores the importance of confronting syncretism and upholding the purity of Christian faith. By acknowledging the supremacy of God's power, the Church can strengthen believers' trust in God's intervention and reject occult practices.

The analysis of these biblical encounters presents a clear distinction between divine miracles and human magic, underscoring the limits of occult powers and the supremacy of God's intervention. For the Church in Nigeria, these narratives call for a rejection of syncretism, greater spiritual discernment, and an emphasis on doctrinal clarity. By upholding the true nature of God's miracles and educating believers, the Church can stand as a beacon of God's power and authority in a world where the lines between magic and miracles are often blurred.

Conclusion

The exploration of miracles and magic from a religious and philosophical viewpoint reveals rich complexities of beliefs and practices that shape the spiritual stance of most Nigerians. This significant examination offers profound insights into the cultural, theological, philosophical and socio-economic dimensions of these phenomena and underscores their significant implications for the church in Nigeria. The interplay between miracles and magic in Nigeria is complex and multifaceted. Miracles, understood as divine interventions that surpass natural laws, hold a central place in the Christian faith, reinforcing belief in God's omnipotence and benevolence. In contrast, magic, often seen as human attempts to harness supernatural forces, occupies a more ambiguous position, sometimes revered and sometimes vilified. The lines between these concepts can blur, especially in a cultural context where indigenous spiritual practices coexist with and influence contemporary religious expressions (Smith, 1978). Adopting an

eclectic approach to interrogate these concepts allows for a holistic understanding that incorporates historical, cultural, theological, philosophical and sociological perspectives. This comprehensive view acknowledges the diverse ways in which Nigerians experience and interpret miracles and magic. It recognizes the deep roots of indigenous beliefs and the transformative impact of Pentecostal and charismatic movements that emphasize miraculous experiences (Afolabi, 2021).

The implications of this interrogation for the church in Nigeria are significant and multifaceted. As a spiritual and social authority, the church must navigate the delicate balance between fostering faith in divine miracles and addressing the presence and influence of magical practices. The church must provide clear theological guidance on the distinctions between miracles and magic. This involves educating her members about the nature of divine intervention, the role of faith and the dangers of syncretism. By fostering a deeper understanding of Christian doctrine, the church can help believers discern and navigate their spiritual experiences. The church should approach the topic with cultural sensitivity, acknowledging the deep-seated traditional beliefs and practices that many Nigerians hold. Respectful engagement with these traditions can create opportunities for dialogue and integration, enriching the faith experience while maintaining doctrinal integrity. The appeal of miracles and magic is often intensified by socioeconomic challenges. By doing so, the church can foster a resilient and grounded faith that relies on divine power and human compassion. Encouraging authentic faith practices that rely on scriptural truths and personal relationship with God is essential.

Interrogating miracles and magic from a religious and philosophical viewpoint offers valuable insights and challenges for

the church in Nigeria (Iwuagwu, 2021; Afolabi, 2021; Brown, 2006 and Brown, 2002). By embracing a holistic and culturally sensitive approach, the church can navigate the complexities of these phenomena and provide meaningful guidance to its members. This involves theological clarity, cultural sensitivity, practical support, and holistic pastoral care. Through these efforts, the church can foster a community of faith that is deeply rooted in Christian principles, responsive to the diverse spiritual landscape of Nigeria. This will enable the church to fulfill its mission of nurturing faithful, compassionate and resilient community that reflects the transformative power of God's love and grace.

Recommendations

Develop and implement comprehensive theological education programmes. Create and distribute educational materials that explain the theological and philosophical bases of miracles and the biblical stance on magic.

Develop comprehensive pastoral care programs that include spiritual guidance, emotional support and practical assistance to support members.

Encourage practices that foster genuine spiritual experiences and personal relationship with God. Develop discipleship programmes that help believers grow in their personal faith and relationship with God.

The Christian should also be wary of manipulators who institute magical powers in a bid to convince otherwise.

Assist members to cultivate a faith that is grounded in authentic spiritual practices and experiences.

Engage in continuous research to better understand the evolving spiritual landscape and beliefs in miracles and magic.

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