

A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF PENTECOSTAL PRACTICES IN LAGOS, NIGERIA USING C. S. LEWIS' PHILOSOPHY OF MIRACLES

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ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 0353

Accepted Date: 07/04/2026

Published Date: 30/05/2026

Type: Research

ABSTRACT

This study examines miracle practices within contemporary Pentecostal churches in Lagos, Nigeria, through the philosophical framework of C. S. Lewis. While Pentecostal Christianity strongly emphasizes divine healing, prophecy, deliverance, and supernatural intervention, concerns regarding manipulation, commercialization, and ethical abuse have increasingly emerged. Existing studies have mainly focused on sociological and anthropological dimensions, leaving a gap in philosophical evaluation. This research therefore investigates the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical foundations of miracle claims within selected Pentecostal communities in Lagos. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining philosophical analysis with qualitative fieldwork involving interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Findings reveal that miracles function both as existential resources and as mechanisms of religious authority and economic influence. Some practices appear to reflect genuine transformative experiences, while others exhibit characteristics of emotional manipulation, staged testimonies, and commercialization. Using Lewis' philosophy of miracles as a framework for discernment, the study argues that miracles should neither be dismissed outright nor accepted uncritically. The research concludes that authentic miracle practices require rational scrutiny, ethical accountability, and theological integrity.

Keywords: Pentecostal miracles, C. S. Lewis, Manipulation, Religious commodification, Existential necessity

Introduction

Pentecostal Christianity has become one of the most influential religious movements in Nigeria, with Lagos serving as a major center of Pentecostal expansion and innovation due to its dense population, economic inequality, and media infrastructure (Marshall, 2009; Meyer, 2004). Central to Pentecostal spirituality is the belief in miracles understood as manifestations of divine intervention through healing, prophecy, deliverance, and material breakthroughs (Anderson, 2013). In many urban communities characterized by economic insecurity, unemployment, and fragile healthcare systems, miracles provide hope and existential meaning for believers (Gifford, 2004).

However, the rapid growth of miracle-centered ministries has also generated debates concerning authenticity and accountability. Cases of staged healings, emotional manipulation, financial exploitation, and prophetic inaccuracies have raised questions about the ethical dimensions of Pentecostal practices (Ukah, 2016). Philosophers such as David Hume questioned the rationality of miracle claims (Hume, 2007), while C. S. Lewis defended miracles as rationally possible within a theistic worldview (Lewis, 2001). This study therefore applies Lewis' philosophy to evaluate miracle practices in Pentecostal churches in Lagos and distinguish authentic miracles from manipulative practices.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Lagos has intensified scholarly attention on miracles and supernatural practices. Pentecostal churches commonly emphasize healing, prophecy, deliverance, and divine intervention as solutions to social and economic challenges (Anderson, 2013; Kalu, 2008). While these practices provide meaning and hope, increasing concerns have emerged regarding commercialization, staged miracles, emotional manipulation, and exploitation of vulnerable worshippers (Gifford, 2004; Ukah, 2016).

Existing studies on Pentecostalism in Nigeria have focused mainly on sociological and anthropological explanations, leaving insufficient philosophical engagement with the concepts of miracle, authenticity, and manipulation (Marshall, 2009; Meyer, 2004). The distinction between genuine miracles and deceptive religious performances remains inadequately explored. This study therefore addresses this gap by applying C. S. Lewis' philosophy of miracles to critically evaluate Pentecostal miracle practices in Lagos (Lewis, 2001).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Analyze Pentecostal miracle practices in Lagos using C. S. Lewis' philosophical framework.
2. Examine the social and existential meanings of miracles among believers. Critically evaluate the authenticity and ethical dimensions of miracle claims.
3. Explore the implications of miracle practices for African Christianity and philosophy of religion.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

How can C. S. Lewis' theory of miracles be used to distinguish authentic miracles from manipulative practices in Pentecostal churches in Lagos?

How are miracles defined, experienced, and interpreted within Pentecostal communities in Lagos?

What socio-economic and psychological factors shape miracle claims in Pentecostal churches?

In what ways do some Pentecostal miracle practices exhibit characteristics of manipulation? What ethical implications arise from the intersection of miracles and manipulation?

Literature Review

African Pentecostalism strongly emphasizes spiritual power, divine intervention, and miracles as evidence of God's presence (Anderson, 2013). Scholars such as Allan Anderson explain that miracles are central expressions of faith within Pentecostal communities. Paul Gifford argues that miracles often reinforce religious authority and institutional power (Gifford, 2004), while Birgit Meyer explains that miracle narratives help believers cope with uncertainty, poverty, and insecurity (Meyer, 2004). Philosophical debates on miracles have largely been shaped by David Hume, who argued that miracles contradict the uniformity of human experience and are therefore irrational (Hume, 2007). In contrast, C. S. Lewis argues that miracles are philosophically possible within a theistic worldview because nature is not a closed system (Lewis, 2001). Richard Swinburne and Timothy McGrew further defend miracles through probabilistic reasoning and testimony (McGrew & McGrew, 2013; Swinburne, 2004).

Although sociological approaches provide important insights, they often reduce miracles to coping mechanisms or instruments of manipulation. Conversely, theological approaches sometimes fail to critically evaluate abuses associated with miracle practices. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach combining philosophy, theology, sociology, and ethics is necessary for understanding miracles within African Pentecostalism (Marshall, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the philosophy of miracles developed by C. S. Lewis in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (Lewis, 2001). Lewis argues that miracles are not irrational violations of natural law but supernatural interventions that introduce a higher causal order into nature. He rejects strict naturalism and maintains that belief in miracles is rational within a theistic worldview. According to Lewis, miracles must satisfy the criteria of logical coherence, credible testimony, and consistency with divine purpose. His theory therefore provides a framework for evaluating miracle claims critically rather than accepting or rejecting them blindly.

Lewis also emphasizes rational discernment and moral responsibility in evaluating miracles. Genuine miracles, according to him, should produce spiritual transformation and moral significance rather than serving as spectacles for personal gain or institutional control (Lewis, 2001). This framework is particularly relevant to Pentecostal churches in Lagos because it allows for openness to authentic divine experiences while exposing manipulative practices rooted in financial exploitation, emotional coercion, and abuse of religious authority (Reppert, 2003).

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design that combined philosophical analysis with qualitative empirical investigation in order to examine Pentecostal miracle practices in Lagos, Nigeria. The philosophical dimension involved a critical analysis of C. S. Lewis' theory of miracles as presented in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (Lewis, 2001), particularly his views on divine intervention, rationality, and natural law. The empirical aspect of the study involved fieldwork conducted in selected Pentecostal churches in Ikeja, Ajah, and Mushin, Lagos. A purposive sampling technique was used to select seven Pentecostal churches known for miracle-centered practices, with a total of 40 participants comprising pastors, church workers, and congregants (Patton, 2015). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation during healing and deliverance services, and document analysis of sermons, testimonies, church flyers, and social media materials. The data were

analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model of coding, theme development, and interpretation. The findings were then interpreted using Lewis' philosophical framework in order to critically evaluate the distinction between authentic miracles and manipulative religious practices.

Results

Research Question One: How can C. S. Lewis' theory distinguish authentic miracles from manipulation?

The findings reveal that Lewis' theory provides a useful framework for distinguishing genuine miracles from manipulative practices. Genuine miracles were associated with humility, transformation, and spiritual growth, while manipulative practices emphasized emotional spectacle, financial contributions, and unquestioned loyalty to religious leaders (Lewis, 2001).

Research Question Two: How are miracles defined and experienced?

Participants defined miracles as divine interventions that solve personal crises such as illness, unemployment, infertility, and financial hardship. Healing, prophecy, deliverance, and testimonies were interpreted as evidence of God's active presence in everyday life (Marshall, 2009).

Research Question Three: What factors shape miracle claims?

The study found that socio-economic insecurity, poverty, fear, illness, and urban uncertainty strongly influence belief in miracles (Gifford, 2004). Emotional worship atmospheres, collective expectations, and charismatic leadership also shape the production and reception of miracle claims.

Research Question Four: In what ways do Pentecostal practices show manipulation?

Some practices showed characteristics of manipulation through staged testimonies, emotional coercion, commercialization, and discouragement of questioning religious authority. The practice of "seed sowing" often linked financial giving to divine intervention, creating pressure on vulnerable worshippers (Ukah, 2016).

Research Question Five: What are the ethical implications?

The study identified serious ethical concerns surrounding the exploitation of vulnerable believers and commercialization of miracles. Such practices undermine theological integrity and human dignity. Ethical accountability and transparency were therefore identified as necessary within Pentecostal ministries (Keener, 2011).

Below are thematic findings based on field data. The analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic method.

Theme 1: Miracles as Existential Necessity

Participants frequently described miracles as solutions to life crises. A 34-year old female trader in Ajah says: "In Lagos, if God does not intervene, who will help you? Miracle is survival." This aligns with African theology, where miracles function as existential tools rather than abstract metaphysical events. For the male pastor in Ikeja aged 42 years, "Miracles are the proof that God is active. If people do not see power, they will not believe. In Lagos, people need results, not theology." This reflects what Marshall (2009) describes as pragmatic spirituality, where religious truth is validated through visible outcomes.

Theme 2: Emotional Atmosphere and Suggestibility

A 28-year old male technician observes that "When the pastor is praying, you just feel something... even if you were not sick before, you can fall under power." From a Humean perspective, this raises concerns about emotional contagion and psychological suggestion (Hume, 2007). For this female pastor in Ajah aged 51 years, "Not everything called miracle is

from God. Some pastors manipulate emotions. But genuine miracles exist.” This internal critique supports the need for discernment frameworks.

Theme 3: Authority and Power Dynamics

A 41-year old female civil servant in Mushin says: “If Daddy says it is done, it is done. You do not question the anointing.” This shows how the clergy authority shapes belief. It also reveals potential for manipulation, especially where questioning is discouraged.

Theme 4: Ambiguity in Discernment

A 36-year old businessman in Mushin confessed that “Some miracles are real, but some... you just believe because others are believed.” This confirms lack of clear epistemological criteria; reliance on communal validation and commercialization of Miracles. In the same vein, a female congregant in Ajah aged 34 years confessed: “I believed I was healed during the service, but the sickness came back after some weeks. I did not tell anyone because they said doubt blocks miracles.” This illustrates cognitive dissonance and social pressure, aligning with the concern of Alston (1991) about experiential epistemology.

Theme 5: Miracle as a religious economy (Prosperity Miracle)

An anonymous participant in Ikeja observed that “Before serious prayer, they will ask you to sow seed. If you do not, your case may not be urgent.” This reflects manipulative structures, aligning with Hume’s suspicion of motivated testimony. The “seed of faith” doctrine encourages financial giving in expectation of divine return. As a religious economy, miracles function within a transactional framework of seed offerings, tithes linked to breakthroughs and special miracle services. This aligns with Gifford’s (2004) notion of religious commodification.

Theme 6: Genuine Transformative Experiences

A 52-year old female congregant in Ajah observes: “I was sick for years. After that prayer, everything changed. No doctor can explain it.” The framework of Lewis allows openness to authentic divine intervention and events that transcend natural explanation. Healing testimonies are central to Pentecostal worship. While some participants report genuine transformation, others raise concerns about lack of medical verification (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015).

Theme 7: Deceptive Miracle

In Mushin, a former member of a particular church, aged 29 years noted that “Sometimes testimonies are arranged. They will tell you what to say before going to the altar.” This provides direct evidence of performative construction of miracles, raising ethical concerns.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study reveal that miracle practices within Pentecostal churches in Lagos are deeply connected to the existential realities of believers, including poverty, illness, unemployment, and insecurity. Many participants viewed miracles as evidence of divine intervention and a source of hope in difficult social conditions. This supports C. S. Lewis’ argument that miracles are meaningful expressions of divine action within human history rather than irrational violations of nature (Lewis, 2001). Lewis’ concept of ontological realism helps explain why believers perceive miracles as genuine encounters with transcendence. Reports of healing, prophecy, and deliverance therefore reflect sincere religious experiences that cannot simply be dismissed as illusions or superstition.

However, the findings also revealed evidence of emotional manipulation, commercialization, staged testimonies, and abuse of religious authority. Some participants described practices where financial contributions were linked to divine intervention through “seed sowing,” while others reported arranged testimonies and pressure to maintain belief even when miracles failed to occur. These findings align with Lewis’ emphasis on rational

discernment and moral responsibility in evaluating miracle claims (Lewis, 2001). According to his framework, authentic miracles should promote spiritual transformation and ethical integrity rather than personal enrichment or institutional control. The study therefore demonstrates that while some Pentecostal miracle claims may reflect genuine religious experiences, others function as manipulative mechanisms shaped by economic interests, emotional suggestibility, and charismatic authority. Consequently, Lewis' philosophy provides a balanced framework that allows openness to divine possibility while demanding critical evaluation, ethical accountability, and theological integrity within Pentecostal practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Pentecostal miracle practices in Lagos are complex phenomena shaped by faith, culture, economics, and social realities. Miracles function both as sources of hope and as possible instruments of manipulation. While C. S. Lewis' philosophy supports the possibility of genuine miracles, it also requires rational evaluation and ethical responsibility (Lewis, 2001). The study concludes that miracle claims should neither be dismissed entirely nor accepted without scrutiny. A balanced approach combining philosophy, theology, sociology, and ethics is necessary for understanding Pentecostal miracle practices (Marshall, 2009). Ultimately, the credibility of Pentecostal Christianity depends on preserving the ethical and spiritual integrity of miracles.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Pentecostal churches should establish ethical guidelines regulating miracle practices and testimonies. Religious leaders should encourage critical thinking and theological education among believers. Healing testimonies should, where possible, be subjected to medical verification. Churches should avoid excessive commercialization of miracles through compulsory financial donations or "seed sowing." Scholars should promote interdisciplinary research on African Pentecostalism and miracle practices. Religious institutions should promote accountability, transparency, and pastoral sensitivity in miracle ministries.

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