

**In the Shadow of Faith: A Personal Reflection on Power and Scandal
in Nigerian Pentecostalism**

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Introduction

The BBC Africa Eye, in collaboration with Open Democracy, released a three-part documentary on YouTube on January 8, 2024. This documentary focuses on the late Temitope Balogun Joshua, also known as Prophet TB Joshua, who founded the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) in Lagos State, Nigeria. The documentary features interviews with former SCOAN church workers, referred to as "disciples," with a total of thirty disciples interviewed, although only a quarter were included in the final production. Each documentary episode explores different aspects of TB Joshua's life and alleged misconduct. Episode 1 provides an overview of TB Joshua's background, the growth of SCOAN, and the involvement of the interviewed individuals with the church. Episode 2 delves into TB Joshua's practices, including allegations of occultic practices and the use of esoteric materials, as reported by the interviewees. This episode also includes revelations from female ex-disciples about their alleged sexual abuse by TB Joshua, including incidents involving minors. Among the allegations made are instances of sexual abuse such as rape, coerced abortions, and psychological manipulation. The final episode focuses on TB Joshua's alleged lack of concern following the collapse of SCOAN's guesthouse in 2014, which resulted in the death of approximately 116 worshippers, including 85 South Africans.

The release of these videos on YouTube quickly sparked a worldwide debate, with some individuals praising and others condemning the BBC. However, most negative feedback towards the publication and the interviewees came not only from SCOAN members but also from fans and supporters of TB Joshua, who had received his assistance, either financially or in other ways, throughout his life.

Therefore, how can individuals choose to either support or withdraw support for TB Joshua, considering the allegations made against him? With approximately 30 individuals providing testimony against him in the documentary, should we assume that all of them are lying? Each reader must make their own judgement. However, it is unlikely that BBC Africa

Eye and Open Democracy, who collaborated to produce this documentary, orchestrated a witch-hunt agenda.

Exposing Abuse in the Church

In recent years, there has been significant and widespread exposure to abuse within religious institutions worldwide, including in both African Pentecostal communities and Western contexts.

Just a few days ago, on January 25, 2024, Figaro published a report revealing the likelihood of sexual abuse against 9,355 minors within the German Protestant Church since 1946. It was found that 2,200 of these minors were victims of sexual abuse, with approximately 1,259 church staff members identified as perpetrators. These revelations follow a series of similar allegations against the Catholic Church, where cases of child sexual abuse have been reported in countries such as France and Canada, uncovering long-standing systemic issues that have remained hidden for decades.

The issue of pedocriminality within the Catholic Church in France has been an ongoing problem, with numerous priests facing accusations of abuse of both minors and adults. In an interview with *Le Monde* on January 15, 2023, historian Blandine Chelini-Pont, when discussing recent allegations against the former Archbishop of Paris, Michel Aupetit, described it and others within the Catholic Church, as the most severe in the history of Christianity. This statement is not an exaggeration, as the independent Commission for Sexual Abuse in the Church (CIASE) report focusing on the period from 1950 to 2020 revealed that nearly 216,000 children were sexually abused by these priests.

Cases of sexual abuse have also plagued other religious denominations. Recently, Anglican churches in Canada, England, Wales, and Australia have all come forward with

reported abuse, particularly involving minors. On October 5, 2022, the BBC published an article revealing that the Church of England had discovered "new" cases involving 168 children and 149 vulnerable adults. The United Methodist Church and mainstream Methodist Church have also faced allegations of sexual abuse, with incidents dating back to 1950 involving over 2,000 alleged abusers who were church ministers and lay employees.

Furthermore, various forms of abuse have been reported in charismatic/pentecostalist societies worldwide. One notable example is the televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, who publicly confessed to engaging in extramarital affairs during a televised speech. In the past week, three former female members appeared before the Senate in the Philippines to testify against Pastor Apollo Quiboloy of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ (KOJC). They accused him of sexually assaulting them and 197 other members, many of whom were minors. Some victims claimed that they had endured this abuse for almost a decade. Quiboloy was also accused of engaging in other criminal activities, such as human trafficking and other forms of modern-day slavery. The harrowing accounts given by these women were reminiscent of those shared by former SCOAN members in the BBC documentary. Both religious organisations referred to their staff members differently, with SCOAN using the term 'disciples' and KOJC using 'pastorals'. Moreover, both SCOAN and KOJC operated in structured buildings, which facilitated the perpetuation of the abuse.

This leads to reflective inquiries about whether some Neo-Pentecostal churches may be categorised as cultic sects. The reports and documentary interpretations reveal hidden negative power dynamics that are challenging to identify, enabling the manipulation of minds and a sense of impunity among perpetrators. For example, the rise and fall of cultic sects, such as the Order of the Solar Temple founded by Luc Jouret and Joseph Di Mambro, illustrate the severe consequences of unbridled power and manipulation within religious groups. Even after the collective mass suicide in 1994 in France, Canada, and Switzerland, it might have been assumed that it was the end of this sect. However, in 1997, five more members in Canada self-immolated, highlighting the difficulty in reorienting the mindset of victims of coercive control who had been conditioned for years beyond redemption. This could also help explain why numerous followers and admirers of TB Joshua adamantly rejected the allegations against him.

Each of the mentioned cases, as well as countless others that remain undisclosed, highlights a disturbing trend of abuse and exploitation disguised as religious authority. The scandals that have emerged have exposed not only the widespread occurrence of sexual abuse, but also the negligence of other church leaders in addressing and preventing such misconduct. This has sparked a global demand for religious organisations to be held accountable and undergo reform.

Nature of Abuse in African and Nigerian Pentecostalism: The Case of TB Joshua

In the context of African and Nigerian Pentecostalism, there have been numerous occurrences of misconduct, abuse of authority, and disregard for their congregants. These instances encompass cases of sexual assault against female church personnel and members, public displays of sexual stimulation towards female congregants during services, compelling followers to consume grass, participating in degrading acts, such as stepping on individuals and using them as human horses, showcasing a luxury vehicle on the pulpit, establishing a harem where underage girls endured ongoing sexual abuse, and enforcing strict periods of fasting without liquids on members and their children under the pretext of encountering Jesus.

The case of TB Joshua and his SCOAN serves as a prominent example of the intricate nature of abuse within these communities. TB Joshua's ministry, known for its charismatic leadership, philanthropic gestures, and claims of miraculous healings, has also been marred by allegations ranging from sexual misconduct to financial and spiritual exploitation. It is worth noting that this is not the first time TB Joshua has faced accusations of similar crimes. Many of his former disciples had previously spoken out against his doctrinal methods and other instances of sexual abuse while he was alive. However, these allegations were never properly investigated, and those who came forward reported experiencing harassment or threats to their lives.

These accusations shed light on how charismatic authority can sometimes be misused, often hidden behind a façade of spirituality and faith. However, it is crucial to recognise that not all African or Nigerian Pentecostal leaders engage in such criminal behaviour.

Balancing Perspectives in the Wake of TB Joshua's Case

The BBC Africa Eye documentary on TB Joshua and SCOAN sparked a nuanced discussion, raising questions about the integrity of Nigerian Pentecostalism and prompting closer examination by legal authorities. While it is crucial to address and confront allegations of abuse, it is equally essential to avoid oversimplifying and unfairly generalising all Nigerian Pentecostal leaders as being complicit in similar misconduct. This essay acknowledges the need for a balanced approach when reporting such cases.

The BBC documentary appears to present a one-dimensional portrayal of Nigerian Pentecostalism, suggesting that all its leaders are complicit in the same heinous crimes as TB Joshua. This portrayal is not only unfair but also untrue and misleading. It is crucial to recognise that Nigerian Pentecostalism is divided into two main categories: Classic and Neo-Pentecostalism. Neo-Pentecostalism encompasses a variety of forms of Pentecostalism that differ in their doctrinal methodologies, tenets, and beliefs. Although they may have common beliefs regarding witchcraft, demonic forces, spirituality over physicality, and prosperity messages, all of which are interconnected with their deliverance practices and doctrines, they operate differently in terms of style and approach. It is important to note that this distinction exists between these two types of Nigerian Pentecostalism.

Moreover, the documentary raises important questions about how allegations are interpreted by the media and public, particularly in cases where the accused is deceased and who, unfortunately, cannot defend himself. TB Joshua's death in 2021 adds another layer of complexity to the situation as he cannot defend himself against these allegations. It is crucial to remember that, in the eyes of the law, a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty, beyond a reasonable doubt. The bar is set high with this standard to ensure that the

prosecution convinces the jury or judges that there is no alternative explanation based on the facts, except that the defendant is guilty of the crime. Conversely, in civil cases, the standard is often "on the balance of probabilities," which means that a fact is more likely to be true than not. This distinction is significant when discussing legal judgments and allegations, particularly in intricate cases, such as those involving TB Joshua, where different types of allegations and evidentiary standards may come into play. It highlights the challenge of weighing testimonies and determining the truth when there is a convergence of public opinion and potential legal scrutiny. This dilemma has led to divergent views, discussions, and concerns expressed on various social media platforms in response to the documentary.

Conclusion: The Path Forward for Nigerian Pentecostalism

The TB Joshua scandal undoubtedly has broader implications for religious leaders and their congregations. In the aforementioned cases involving Orthodox churches, efforts have been made to address these issues, including investigations, apologies, and compensation for victims and their families. This is possible because these churches are regulated by their respective governing bodies. However, African/Nigerian Pentecostalism operates without such oversight, allowing leaders to act with impunity and without facing any consequences for their actions. This means that justice cannot be achieved for victims of crimes committed by leaders such as TB Joshua.

Given these concerns, it is clear that specific actions need to be taken. First, increased transparency and fairness in media reporting are required to ensure balanced and unbiased coverage. Second, Nigerian Pentecostal churches must adopt greater accountability and transparency measures to prevent abuse and exploitation. Finally, it is crucial for the Nigerian government to take a proactive role in regulating these churches. These measures are essential to prevent the perpetuation of abuse and to create a healthier and more responsible religious environment in Nigeria.