A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONS:

Why at the start of the Fourth Industrial Revolution do we see a **rise in cult-type Pentecostal churches** in South Africa?

By Maria Frahm-Arp

In 2013, we saw one of the first broad-based consumer applications of Article Intelligence in Apple and Smartphone devices that began to predict how we wrote text messages. This was just one example of how the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) began, and how it directly affected our lives. Klaus Schwab, the founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, first coined the term 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' to describe the new era of machine and human augmentation and integration. He suggests that this is a time of enormous promise as machines can enhance the way people live, but if we are left behind by this revolution or it is not correctly regulated, it could also be a time of increasing peril for humanity (Schwab 2016).

In South Africa, President Ramaphosa is trying to ensure that South Africa moves into the 4IR. He has spoken about it in his last two State of the Nation addresses and appointed a Commission on 4IR. Many South Africans are not exactly sure what 4IR is or how it will impact their lives, and many fear that it will take away jobs in a country that already has an unemployment rate of 29% and youth unemployment rate of 52% (STATS SA 2019).

The Rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic Cult-type Churches in South Africa

As 4IR began to gain ground, the first wave of reports in the media (in 2015) about cult-type churches that seemed to be springing up all over South Africa from Limpopo to the Eastern Cape began to emerge. Pastors were telling their congregants to eat grass, drink petrol and allow themselves to be sprayed with pesticides all in an effort to affect miracles. In horror, the media reported on this, often infantilizing congregants who were 'so gullible' as to join these churches.

The rise of cult-type churches (like 'Seven Angels Church' in the Eastern Cape, Professor Lesego Daniel's grass-eating church in Pretoria or Shephard Bushiri's 'Enlightened Christian Gathering' or ECG),

is in part, I argue a reaction to the 4IR and ordinary South African people's sense of alienation from this revolution. For many, this is a revolution that seems to be when computers will do the work of people, leaving them unemployed and destitute.

Industrial and Knowledge Revolutions and Christian Disruptions

While Schwab and others think of this as an Industrial Revolution, I think we are also witnessing a Knowledge Revolution, mainly because data/information is at the very heart of this revolution. Many like Gates and Matthews (2014) argue that data will become the new currency of this revolution. A powerful example of this is Cambridge Analytica that used data collected from consumers in order to give political parties the information they needed to manipulate voter behaviour. For retail stores, an essential commodity is customer data, which allows them to target their marketing specifically to the needs and desires of individual customers. Your store loyalty card means that the store knows exactly what your spending habits are and that, for example, at five in the evening, you are most likely to be craving a bar of chocolate. All of this data is a form of knowledge and has revolutionized marketing already.

In this article, I give a brief historical overview of Christianity and show that whenever we have a significant knowledge or industrial revolution, we see both positive and negative religious reactions to this revolution. Often these have sparked the beginnings of new Christianities such as the rise of the Protestant church, following the knowledge revolution that came with the advent of the printing press or the Methodist church following the advent of the first industrial revolution in England and Wales.

The First Knowledge Revolution

One of the most critical knowledge revolutions was the invention of public libraries. The first library was set up in the seventh century BCE and known as the "royal contemplation" of Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian ruler. It was located in Nineveh (in modern-day Iraq) for his personal use. The real revolution in libraries came about in the 300s BCE when public libraries were established. Under the Romans, the library at Alexandria became the most important intellectual centre in the ancient world. It housed scrolls of history, philosophy, mathematics, and literature. What made this library so revolutionary was that it was accessible to the public and was not just a private collection of manuscripts for private use. Collecting data or information in one central space changed the way people had access to information and how they understood the world. This information or knowledge revolution was central to many of the political, social, and engineering feats that were the hallmark of the Roman Empire, particularly over the first three centuries of its existence. Over time people moved away from writing on scrolls and began to write in leather-bound books. An essential part of the work of many monasteries during the Middle Ages was copying out bibles and selling them to rich feudal lords, the church, and kings.

The Second Knowledge Revolution and the Rise of Protestantism

The invention of the printing press in 1440 led to the second knowledge revolution making information accessible to larger groups of people, particularly the emerging middle class that began to form through the centres of commerce in City-States like Amsterdam, Geneva, and London (Woodhead 2004:163-5).

It took three years for Gutenberg to print 200 bibles, a major technological feat in the mid-1400s, but he died penniless because at first the consumption of books and bibles was slow as few people could read. During the mid to late fifteenth century, pamphlets, usually four pages long, were printed with news, political ideas, religious devotions, and stories. Often these were read out loud by a paid reader who read to crowds in pubs and taverns. Over the decades, the demand for information began to increase steadily. The technological advance of mechanized printing meant the wide-spread consumption of ideas as

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people began to consume tracks, pamphlets, and later books.

Books, including bibles, could now be 'mass-produced,' and these bibles and books could be produced outside church structures because printers could print books using a printing press and were not dependant on cheap, educated labour in the form of monks. This technological advance separated the production of bibles from the Catholic Church in Europe. While the Catholic Church did not want people to read the bible in vernacular languages, it, in effect, no longer had direct control over the means of production of bibles.

Before Martin Luther famously pinned his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517 calling for a reformation within the Catholic Church, many others, such as Wycliff and Oakham, had campaigned for the bible to be translated into English, German and Dutch (Woodhead 2004). Printed versions of one of the gospels or a book of the Psalms began to grow in popularity as people started to demand greater access to information, including religious texts and ideas. A central argument within this call for reform was that people should be allowed to read the bible in their vernacular languages and challenge the teachings of the Catholic Church, particularly around 'indulgences'. 'Indulgences' was a system set up by the Catholic Church, which taught that by paying money to the church, people could minimize their sins and therefore their time in purgatory would be shortened. If they paid enough money, they might even be able to go directly to heaven without having to go to purgatory. There is no reference to indulgences or the sale of indulgences in the bible, and therefore, the Catholic Church was keen to ensure that laypeople did not have access to bibles. As most laypeople could not read or understand Latin, the sale of Latin bibles was less problematic, but once translated into vernacular languages, laypeople might begin to use scripture to challenge the Catholic Church's methodologies at the time (Woodhead 2004).

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The technological revolution of the printing press separated the means of the production of Bibles from the Catholic Church in Europe. The 'fast' production of Bibles also meant that they became more affordable, enabling more people to buy Bibles, gospel booklets or books of Psalms. The printing press enabled ordinary people to have access to information either by reading it or having it read to them. The consumption of information created the necessary intellectual groundswell for a Christian revolution, which blazed to life when Luther nailed his thesis to the church door in Wittenberg, and the Protestant Reformation was born.

The First Industrial Revolution and the Rise of the Methodist Church

In England, the Protestant Reformation led to the establishment of the Church of England and the wider Anglican Church. The First Industrial Revolution, in the mid-1700s, occurred with the invention of steam power to fuel engines. The revolution first took root in England and soon led to the first wave of mass urbanization as people flocked to industrial centres like Liverpool and Manchester to work in the factories. The living conditions in the cities were appalling as there was often poor sanitation, housing or access to fresh drinking water. Many of the slum housing built for factory workers, coupled with the appalling working conditions in factories, led to high mortality rates. Luddites were amongst the most vocal group fighting against all the negative changes brought about by the new (steam based) technologies that fuelled this revolution (Deanne 1979).

John Wesley, an Anglican priest, began to call for change within the Anglican church. In 1744 he held the first 'Methodist' conference after attracting crowds to his open-air sermons in coalmines, brickyards, and factors in the emerging industrial cities of Great Britain. Wesley called people to a new intensely personal spirituality in which they were held accountable to their brethren in small chapel communities rather than large traditional churches. He encouraged the formation of small

meeting groups in which people shared their spiritual struggles and religious journeys.

As people began to move to the new industrial centres to work in factories and coal mines, they felt alienated and alone, often losing touch with their home churches. The Methodist Movement with its powerful message of evangelism, personal discipline, hard work and leisure time, was particularly appealing to working-class people as industrialization changed people's working patterns and social networks from rural settings to towns and cities (Hempton 1996:4). Connected to most chapels or Methodist meeting rooms were schools for children, welfare activities and mechanisms through which poor people could access loans. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people argued that Methodism slowed down the industrial revolution in Britain, particularly when compared to the fast pace of invention, production, and change in France. Others suggest that Methodism channelled people's discontent towards religion rather than politics, thereby slowing down desperately needed political reforms (Semmel 1973; Walsh 1979).

The Second Industrial Revolution and the Rise of Classical Pentecostalism

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of the Second Industrial Revolution. This revolution made the relatively affordable mass production of goods, from clothes to cars, possible on a larger scale. With the growing demand for consumer products came the need for cheap labour to make these goods as cost-effectively as possible. Working-class laborers had to deal with the poverty, oppression, illness and alienation experienced in mass production-based factories. Pentecostalism taught people that, through the power of prayer, they would be able to take on a new agency in their lives by praying for the miracles of healing and work in order to sustain their families in the turbulence brought about by the second industrial revolution.

A vital feature of the Methodist Movement, both in Europe and North America where it proved so popular, was revival meetings. These revival meetings, often lead by lay preachers, another critical aspect of Methodism, took place at various times and with different intensities throughout the nineteenth century – particularly in North America and to a lesser extent in Britain. Towards the end of the century, many revival preachers began to espouse a Holiness Gospel arguing that sanctification took place through the Holy Spirit. In the early 1900s, some preachers began to claim one could determine if a person was baptized in the Holy Spirit if they were able to speak in tongues, as the disciples had done at Pentecost. One of the most famous of these preachers was William Seymour, who began to preach his message of Pentecost in Los Angeles in a store-front church on Azusa street (Synan 1997).

Places like Los Angeles in the early 1900s teemed with poor, dispossessed people who streamed to large cities in the hope of finding work. Cities like Los Angeles attracted triply dispossessed migrants from all over the world who had no money, could hardly speak the language of the country, and were often not citizens of that country and were therefore vulnerable to extreme exploitation. The Pentecostal movement, with its focus on speaking in tongues that no one but God and his angels could understand, opened up a new form of Christian worship freed from the constraints of prayer books and hymns in particular languages (Synan 1997).

In South Africa, the first Pentecostal missionaries arrived in 1907 and began to attract followers, particularly in mining communities on the Rand. People shared extraordinary miracles of healing in testimonies, and many new converts gave up alcohol and gambling, thereby enabling them to take better care of their families (Maxwell 1999). The Assemblies of God and the Apostolic Faith Mission were among two of the earliest forms of Classical Pentecostal churches established in South Africa. Many of the ideas of the Pentecostal movement sparked the emergence of Zionist and Apostolic type African Indigenous forms of Christianity (Anderson 2000) in Southern Africa that emerged in the face of coping with racism during changes in work regimes.

The Third Industrial and Knowledge Revolution and the Rise of the Health and Wealth Gospel

Fast forward to the 1960s and we encounter the beginning of yet another revolution. This Third Industrial Revolution is also arguably the third knowledge revolution, as the invention and use of computers not only changed how people worked, what work they did, and what work computers

did, but also their access to information. The invention of the internet in the 1990s radically changed people's access to information with the world wide web, making information accessible to everyone at the click of a button. This was also a time of remarkable economic growth in which capitalist machinery and the marketing industry sold people the dream of' rags to riches', while dot. com millionaires in their twenties seemed to prove this idea that anything was possible (Piketty 2017).

Before the Third Industrial Revolution, two influential new waves took place within Christianity. In the 1950s, the Evangelical Movement swept through the Christian world and was followed in the 1960s by the Charismatic Movement. The Charismatic Movement emerged in mainline churches and was very similar to the Pentecostal Movement but did not believe that speaking in tongues was the only sign of Holy Spirit baptism. Charismatics instead argued that any form of spiritual gift, from prophecy to teaching, including speaking in tongues or translating tongues, was a sign of Holy Spirit baptism. In the 1970s, a new variant of Christianity emerged that drew from all three traditions and preached a gospel of health and wealth, otherwise known as the Prosperity Gospel. This movement rapidly grew in popularity as televangelists like Kenneth Hoggin used the medium of television to spread their gospel to millions of Americans first and was then televised throughout the world (Bergunder 2010).

In the age of rampant capitalism, everyone could apparently become wealthy, and anything was possible, if only people were positive and worked hard according to the Prosperity Gospel which offered believers a secret weapon. The Holy Spirit gave them exclusive access to a power that would make them wealthy and healthy. This wealth could be obtained through prayer and not just through hard work. God wanted to bless all 'His children' with extreme wealth (Daniels 2015) in the language of this health and wealth gospel -and being thin, fit, tanned, and shining with good health – just like a movie or soap opera star meant 'health'.

In South Africa, Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCC) were preaching a similar message of a watered-down version of personal wealth and healing. Churches like Grace Bible Church and Rhema became mega-churches in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They attracted thousands of followers who were not the dispossessed but were rather upwardly mobile, or those who aspired to upward mobility. These churches taught people that through hard work, prayer, and a disciplined lifestyle, an individual could attain their dreams. They encouraged people to break with their families and their past, and commit to God and their own path to upward mobility (Martin 2001; Meyer 1998) through the church. As South Africa moved out of the dark days of apartheid, these churches offered social skills and business training that equipped believers for success in the modern world (Frahm-Arp 2010).

The Fourth Industrial and Knowledge Revolution and the Rise of Cult-type Pentecostalism

However, the optimism and economic growth of the new South Africa began to fade when Jacob Zuma and his followers took office. By 2015 the Rand had fallen, unemployment levels were at very high levels, and the investment grade of the country was heading towards junk status. State capture had happened, and survival, not mobility, became the goal. Onto the religious stage, Professor Lesego Daniel burst telling people to eat grass and drink petrol. In 2016, Lethebo Rabalago, started to spray his congregants with Doom.

These churches loosely form some variant of the Prosperity Gospel. I suggest that they are a cult-type movement because they met the criteria as identified by sociologists of religion (McGuire 2008). They are hierarchical, with a charismatic leader who has all the answers but who only gives selected information to chosen people. Cults tend to attract young adults and encourage people to make a complete break with their families and friends, while giving enormous amounts of time, money, and energy to the church. In many ways, cults often become new religious movements (Beckford 2003). New religious movements often begin within a particular religious tradition. Very often, it is mainly social, economic, political, or technical factors that drive a group of people who feel dispossessed into cult-like systems, thus pushing them to find answers or a sense of belonging in a new religious movement or a re-shaped form of a religious tradition.

In much the same way, the rise of the cult-type churches in South Africa should be understood, at least in part, as people's attempts to try and make

sense of a world that they feel alienated from and are struggling to comprehend. Statistics show that around 50% of young adults in South Africa are currently unemployed, and unless something changes dramatically in South Africa's economy, these people will never find salaried employment. Finding a job in their experience of the world is akin to experiencing a miracle.

A church that 'teaches' them how to pray and perform their faith by eating a snake or being sprayed with a pesticide, is a church that is giving them the 'tools' or agency which they need to show God how much faith they have and how they are more deserving of the miracle of a job or a husband who has job then the people around them. These extra-ordinary religious feats of putting oneself into mortal danger, like drinking petrol or being sprayed with the insecticide Doom, is a way for people who have no or little money to show their extraordinary faith and commitment. The Prosperity Gospel maintains that the more money people give to the church, the more God will bless them. By giving away all money, they have show just how strong their faith is. In poverty-stricken peri-urban environments of South Africa where people do not have access to money, proving their faith through another means has become very popular. While abusing people, putting their lives in danger and teaching them that further impoverishing themselves by giving all they have to the church in order to experience a miracle, goes against the teaching of Christ, these cult-type churches highlight the desperation and alienation that many people feel at the beginning of this Fourth Industrial/Knowledge Revolution.

Conclusion

As I have shown with the previous knowledge and industrial revolutions, within the Christian context, these revolutions have led to the establishment of new forms of Christianity. The nature of these new forms of Christianity are usually in direct response to the needs of ordinary people living through a technological revolution. In each previous revolution, profound technological changes have led to extraordinary social, political, and economic disruptions. These changes have often, but not always, led to the socio-economic dislocation and dispossession of groups of people. Different forms of Christianity have emerged with these various revolutions as churches and church leaders have sort to offer people a means to cope with change. Not all these revolutions have been positive, but to the believers, these different Christianities facilitate hope and a sense of agency to those who felt dispossessed, alienated and oppressed, as these revolutions changed the world and the place of people in that new world order. Perhaps the key lesson to be learned from this overview of history is that as we embrace new technological changes, we as a society also need to find mechanisms to help those who are negatively affected by these disruptions. ■

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Publication date & time: 30 July 2019 @ 11:30

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