

UNDERSTANDING PHANEROO

A Research Summary

PREAMBLE AND PURPOSE OF THIS SUMMARY

Modern evangelicalism should listen to both the Word and the world. The first is an ecclesial call, while the latter is a cultural one. Listening to the Word means developing internal tools for discernment necessary to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). Listening to the world implies becoming salt and light (Mt. 5:13) in an often-collapsing culture. This research caters to the central Christian discipleship duty to heed apostolic doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). But it also inadvertently serves a missional cause in a country like Uganda, where many people hold onto a nominal Christian Faith severed from its historical Christian creeds and teaching. Such nominalism has often hindered the effectiveness of the Great Commission (Mt. 28:16–20) and the Great Commandment (Mt. 22:34–39). This research sought to address two questions: what is Phaneroo, and what does it teach? We geared the first effort to determine the movement’s origins and the second to assessing and discerning their teaching considering historic Christian doctrine.

The Veracity Fount Research Team—commissioned by the Africa Centre for Apologetics Research (ACFAR)—interviewed past and present Phaneroo attendees and purchased video and audio recordings spanning the time Phaneroo has been recording its content. We have read devotionals and listened to online teachings intending to detect any changes in Phaneroo’s doctrinal persuasions over time—if any. No malice or personal bias drove or motivated the fact-finding in this Summary. Also, because summaries can only say so much, we invite you to study the full-length Report for a detailed account.

PHANEROO’S MAKINGS AT MAKERERE UNIVERSITY

On September 16th, 2014 the Uganda Registration Services Bureau incorporated Phaneroo Ministries International Limited as a private company limited by shares. Its leadership involves Grace Lubega, who serves with Zac Mutyaba, Modestar Sweeney, Brian Mwesige, and Emma Muwanguzi (among others). The movement’s origin is traceable to Isaiah Mbuga, pastor at Christ Heart International Ministries (CHM) in Mukono. Mbuga had intended to revive Afro-Stone Fellowship in Africa Ladies Hall of residence at Makerere University (MUK). Grace Lubega, then a member of CHM, often escorted Mbuga to minister in their newfound ministry ground. Then Afro-Stone Fellowship numbers grew. According to a witness, around 2011–2012, students from other universities flocked MUK at their friends’ invitation to “witness” the power of God. Under Mbuga’s guidance, CHM replicated its ministry across university campuses, even outside Kampala. Thanks to their rapid student mobilization it was a swift growth. But as numbers increased, so did Lubega’s influence. At MUK, Lubega’s devotionals edited and summarized as “Shofar of Grace” were dutifully distributed wherever a student was spotted. These devotionals remain Phaneroo’s lifeblood.

PHANEROO’S ETHIC WITH CHAPLAINCIES AND CHURCHES

Phaneroo adherents came to be renowned for “fervent prayer sessions, intense worship, and greater depth in the word of God.” Africa Hall could no longer contain the group, and the nearby Livingstone Boys’ Hall eventually received them. But complaints about the noise their meetings generated moved them only a little further behind the Complex building at MUK. Such noise disruptive of learning spaces was characteristic of Phaneroo’s presence at

the various university campuses. Their Wednesday fellowships at Kyambogo University's Student Center happened without the university's approval and used loud public address systems. Lecturers complained of disrupted evening lectures, and since Phaneroo's fellowships continued till very late in the night, they became a security issue. Next, those interviewed noted a defiant spirit as characteristic of the Phaneroo faithful. Phaneroo fellowship leaders were antagonistic to every university chaplaincy tasked with spiritual oversight over students. At MUBS, for example, followers claimed that they would only submit to Grace Lubega, and the chaplaincy is under them. Indeed, at every campus Phaneroo grew by infiltrating existing Christian Unions (CUs), taking over leadership, or pretending to be the CU.

Meanwhile, rumors of growing sexual immorality in various fellowships gained ground. At UCU and Kyambogo, male fellowship leaders (*papas*) invited their female co-leaders (*mamas*) to sleep at their residences. The same reports surface at MUBS and Kampala International University in Ishaka. One chaplain tells us that when confronted about their immoral lifestyle, the *papas* and *mamas* told him they were "mentoring" and "caring" for one another. CHM's 2015 letter also cited "questionable doctrine, conduct, and morals" among the reasons for the rift between them and Phaneroo. Added reports of academic decline at UCU, MUBS, and Kyambogo persisted as Fellowship leaders assured Phaneroo adherents that their faith—not qualifications—is what God needs to give them jobs.

PHANEROO'S "SUBMISSION" DOCTRINE

Grace Lubega summons cultic loyalty and obedience from all Phaneroo members as his "spiritual children." Failure to submit to him could lead to death, as he states in his *Submission to Ordinances* sermon at MUK. Many who submit to him fear to mention his name without title lest the blessing passes by them. Among those who have left, there is deep dread that he hears them "in the Spirit" when they speak about him or if they don't address him by his title. Even after they separate from Phaneroo he continues to haunt them. Witnesses say Lubega summons submission in dreams, through which he even teaches ladies how to cook. Moreover, Lubega "imparts his spirit" to those he chooses through an initiation of sorts. Such initiations are often through watches Lubega gives to his leaders. Some who experienced this "initiation" report feeling strange power flowing through their bodies upon placing the watch on their arm. Over these, Lubega has such complete influence that even after leaving, they live in fear that the "apostle" may "steal their spirit"—an insider code-word for being killed. Ex-Phaneroo members who die become examples of what happens should you leave the movement or "the will of God." Phaneroo holds itself to be the center of God's will on earth.

PHANEROO'S GNOSTIC TEACHING

A key to understanding Phaneroo is in our knowledge of an ancient movement, *Gnosticism*. Broadly speaking, Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge) emphasized deep knowledge or revelation over sanctification. It held a hierarchy between spirit, soul, and body, thinking the spirit the nobler and the body the baser of the three. As such, it looked down on the body and material reality. Gnosticism conceived salvation primarily as deliverance from ignorance, which it considered the fundamental human problem instead of sin. Gnosticism taught that every Christian is Christ, of the same nature and origin as him. It taught that humans are divine stars or *aeons* who descended from and returned to the spiritual realm. It taught that Jesus and Christ are not the same—that Jesus was the earthly man, while the Christ was heavenly.

Phaneroo: Jesus and Christ are not the same. Phaneroo in *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* teaches that Jesus and Christ are not the same. Jesus is earthly, while Christ is heavenly. It says that Jesus' temptation in the garden of Gethsemane showed that he was "a man who wanted to live. Jesus wanted to be like any other man: grow up, have children, and have a good life. But the Christ could not allow the Jesus." You could find similar sentiments in *Christ the Ultimate Reality* and *The Revelations of the Christ*. But the Bible twice insists that "the Christ was Jesus" (Acts 18:5, 28). The early Church rejected Gnosticism and condemned such ideas that introduced a rupture in the personhood of God the Son, insisting that Jesus was one person with two natures. You may find the extensive analysis of this teaching in the main Report.

Phaneroo: Jesus is a divine star like us. To the Gnostics, Jesus is more of an example of our potential as divine stars since He, too, is a star. Phaneroo teaches the same. Lubega, in *Glorious Stars*, insists that "We, too, as children of God, are stars (Deut. 1:10) and come in the likeness of that one star, Jesus." Similar sentiments exist in *Man from Above*. Like Gnostics, Phaneroo conceives of Jesus, like all humans, to be an aeon, a star. But the Bible insists that Jesus is God the Son—not one of among many, but "the unique one," in His genre as a Person (Jn. 1:18, 3:16). Unlike us, He is God and the creator of all that exists (Jn. 1:1–3; Rev. 1:8).

Phaneroo: Christ = Me. Because Phaneroo claims that Jesus is a divine star as we are, they teach that Christ equals me. In *Before You Were Formed in Your Mother's Womb, I Knew Thee*, Phaneroo teaches that "(God) entered Christ and all the attributes of Christ He gave them to you, power, money. Christ = Me." Elsewhere, in *One with God*, Phaneroo says that "No one can tell the difference between you and the Master anymore." Such teaching agrees with Gnosticism against what the Bible says. Phaneroo confuses our union with Christ with sameness as Him. It presupposes that our being joined to Christ makes us Christ, that our union with God makes us God. This is against biblical monotheism: there is one God (Isa. 43:10–12, 44:8; Deut. 6:4), subsisting in ONLY three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit (Mt. 28:18–20; Jude 1:20–21; 2 Cor. 13:14). Whoever cannot tell the difference between the creature and God is lost.

Phaneroo: Christ is no longer human. The teaching that Christ is no longer human follows Phaneroo's gnostic disdain of the body. Phaneroo uses 2 Corinthians 5:16 to teach that "Christ in the flesh is no more" (*Revelations of Christ*). But Paul above is not saying Christ is not human as we speak, but rather, our mode of knowing Jesus cannot be carnal or fleshly. But elsewhere, the Bible affirms that Jesus is human, even as we speak (1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Cor. 15:13–14; Lk. 24:39).

Phaneroo: You are the Creator. The idea that no one can tell the difference between you and the Creator logically leads Phaneroo to insist that "everything that must be or will be exists and will come to be by you" (*Authority in Life*). That is, you are the creator; you are God. They say in *The Words of This Life* that they are "100% God-beings." Similar ideas are in *The Distinctive Believer*. But the Bible places the God of Israel, not humanity, at the center of existence (Ps. 115:3, 135:6; Isa. 44:24; Col. 1:15–16). There is one God, and everything comes to be by, through, and for Him. Only God does as He pleases. There is no "God-being" except the one God of Israel.

Phaneroo: Man Preexisted as a Star. We already saw this in *Glorious Stars* (see also *Man from Above* and *Predestination*). Phaneroo misinterprets Genesis 1:26 and 2:7 to mean that we existed as spirits in heaven before coming on earth physically. In so doing, Phaneroo follows Gnostics, but primarily builds on Plato's theory of recollection in *Phaedo*. But to see

Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 2:7 as concerning two creations is erroneous. The two Genesis accounts detail the same creation, with Genesis 1:26–31 giving us a snapshot of *what* God created (humanity) and *why* (with us as God’s co-regents), while Genesis 2:7 zooms in on 1:26 and explains *how* God created man (out of dust). In other words, the second account tells us the details concerning the first account, about the process through which God brought man into existence. These are not two separate creations, but two accounts of one creation.

Phaneroo: Salvation is an upward trajectory. Phaneroo sees salvation as our loss of humanity as we ascend to the realm of the gods. In *The Purged Conscience*, they say that “God came in the inside of you, and everything that made you a human being was quenched, eaten up.” What remains, for them, is God. Thus, “when they ask where God is, just stand up straight, chin up, chest out and present yourself” (*The Experiences of the Word*). Thus, for Phaneroo, salvation is not God becoming human to reconcile us to Himself, but rather, God consuming everything human to make you God. But if God destroyed everything that made us human, He is not our Savior but a terminator. The pinnacle of our salvation is not the destruction of our bodies but their redemption (Rom. 8:18–24; 1 Cor. 15:12–58).

Phaneroo: Christians Cannot Sin. Following the idea that its followers are God, Phaneroo teaches that they do not sin. In *Why We Preach the Grace: The Sin Question–1*, Lubega says, “[b]eloved saint, sin is not your problem; it speaks a dead language to you. When it presents itself in any form, you cannot understand it because it is foreign.” (See similar sentiments in *Experiences of the Word* and *Condemning the Guiltless*.) However, the Apostle John writes that anyone who claims to be without sin or beyond sinning is deceiving himself and a liar (1 Jn. 1:7–10). The “we” language John uses refutes the idea that John was addressing unbelievers. Moreover, 2 Corinthians 7:1 disproves the idea that the believer’s spirit is sinless.

Phaneroo: Christians cannot die. Phaneroo teaches that Christians *who know who they are* cannot die. In *Spirit, Soul, and Body* Lubega insists that “[y]ou can’t die! That’s the secret; you can’t die. That is the thing the devil has lied [about]—those are deceptions that you have put in your spirit. You cannot die if you stick to the Word.” The Gnostics, too, taught that because they have a divine nature, they cannot die. But the Bible says no such thing. Christ died and called us on the road to death (Lk. 9:23). Steven’s death (Acts 7:58–30) did not demonstrate that he did not know who he was. James died (Acts 12:1–5), and Paul—who was prepared to die for the gospel (Acts 21:13)—wasn’t immature. For the Christian, death is not the test of maturity but a way to be fully human and truly with God.

Phaneroo: Salvation is chiefly deliverance from ignorance. Phaneroo insists in *Submitted to His Grace* that “[t]he problem in the church is not sin; the problem in the church is knowledge.” Lubega chose *Phaneroo* as his ministry’s name because—like the Gnostics—he sees ignorance, not sin, as the main human problem. Thus he wanted to “make manifest”—that is, bring “forth things that men never thought existed, yet they did, in fact, exist.” Phaneroo, like the Gnostics, posits three classes of people. In *The Experience of Epignosis*, Phaneroo speaks of unbelievers in group one, the Christians who only have *gnosko* and require instructions to know what is correct in the second group, and then those who have *epignosis* and transcend boundaries. But our knowledge of God does not separate us into classes as Christians. We are not more spiritual than others on account of anything we may know that they don’t. Our Love for God and our neighbor and obedience to God’s commands is the only test of our spiritual maturity (Col. 3:12–15). Plus the Bible is replete with passages that point to Christ’s saving work on the cross dealing with man’s sin, even in believers (Col. 3:3–11; Eph. 4:22–24).

Phaneroo: God cannot say no. For Lubega, you need to “[be]lieve in yourself” because “[i]t is your choice to fix things” (see *Created in Christ* and *The Distinctive Believer*). Human-centeredness grounds Phaneroo’s prosperity teaching. For Phaneroo, the “God-kind of faith” always works whatever we want. God is a kind of errand boy who does as we say. “Faith is the liberty to do as you please,” and “A God that sometimes can say ‘no’ is not the God of Phaneroo” (*The Double-Edged Sword*). But the Bible never tolerates the claim that the uniquely sovereign God exists as a yes-man to us. God many times—and for our good—says no to our requests, as Paul knows well (2 Cor. 12:7–10). Only spoilt kids always have their way with their parents. But the God of the Bible will even deliver unpleasant chastisement for our good (Heb. 12:4–11) and will sometimes deny our prayers for His glory.

The above is a summary. For a more complete treatment of Phaneroo, its origins and doctrine, please consult the full-length report by Veracity Fount.

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