

Reshaping Sub-Saharan African Christianity

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In 1992, the sub-Saharan African country of Ghana voted for constitutional democracy, following more than a decade of military dictatorship, and private ownership of the media was legalized. The new democracy has generated at least four private TV and many FM radio stations across the country including Joy FM whose owner is a member of the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC).

Pastor Mensa Otabil founder and General Overseer of ICGC began broadcasting on Joy FM on Sunday mornings in 1995, and later on TV3 on Sunday evenings. The 30-minute radio religious programme is dubbed Living Word, the same as his TV 3 program. Joy FM, as part of celebrations marking its 10th anniversary, interviewed Otabil who stated in part:

'It is not only Joy FM that is celebrating ten years of operation. I am also celebrating a decade of Christian broadcasting in Ghana. If Joy FM had not given me the opportunity, I would still have probably remained a "hidden voice" restricted to a little church somewhere. Joy FM has made it possible for me to share my ideas with a wider audience and take the message of Christ to a wider group of people beyond my congregation.'

Pastor Mensa Otabil's ICGC belongs to the new stream of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches whose voices and piety have been reshaping African Christianity since their emergence at the end of the 1970s.

These fundamentalist ministries have become visible manifestations of the shift in the demographic centre of gravity of Christianity from the northern to the southern continents, particularly Africa. Membership and leadership of the new churches tend to be young, professional, dynamic, and educated. The churches are mega-sized, urban-centred, and the medium of communication is mostly English.

Pentecostal/Charismatic churches and their leaders have a very international outlook, seen partly in the worldwide peregrinations of their leaders. Their choice of names invariably include the expressions 'World', 'International', 'Global', or 'Worldwide', and reflect this internationalism. The appropriation of modern media technologies has almost become part of Pentecostal/Charismatic self-definition, and the messages of the leaders travel well beyond the confines of their churches. This extensive use of media thus contributes immensely to the

visibilities they enjoy.

The Pentecostal/Charismatic groups in question are defined by their disproportionate emphasis on the experiential presence of the Holy Spirit as 'fundamental' to Christianity. In the religious context, 'fundamentalism' is usually used to describe groups given to religious militancy with a political agenda. Such groups are not constrained by the fact of religious pluralism. Religious pluralism is a situation of religious diversity that allows others to practice their faith without discrimination and within the limits defined by law.

In this article, the new African Pentecostal/Charismatic churches are referred to as 'fundamentalists' only because, wherever they are found, they exist as critiques of the 'dry denominationalism' of historic mission denominations. They are also quite critical of African traditional religions, which they often demonize as stuck in backward traditions, and belonging to the realm of the devil.

In most sub-Saharan African countries, Pentecostal/Charismatic churches operate with a theological understanding that there is a strong connection between prosperity and Christian leadership. God, it is taught, blesses the nation only if political leadership acknowledges his sovereignty and such Christian leaders come to power only when Christians pray. The main agenda of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches therefore, is to bring their influence to bear on all aspects of national life including discouraging any official recognition of other faiths, and the media have proven a very powerful means of achieving this end.

Fundamentalism, media and politics

In the run up to Ghana's last elections Joy FM, for example, sponsored at least four all-night prayer vigils in Pentecostal/Charismatic churches 'to pray towards peaceful elections'. These services were broadcast live and one of them, held at the Prayer Cathedral of the Christian Action Faith Ministries International, attracted up to 3,000 participants. Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in Africa command such a wide following that the governments of various African countries are virtually forced to court their friendship. Leading politicians seeking to secure the favour of the electorate therefore attend Pentecostal/Charismatic prayer vigils and church services. The relationship between the new churches as groups purveying fundamental ideas and politics is not limited to Ghana.

In his attempt to use this type of Christianity to prop up his ebbing support, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, for example, organized a Prayer Breakfast in November 1990 to which Pentecostal/Charismatic leaders were invited. He lost power to Frederick Chiluba, who in December 1991 used his Pentecostal/Charismatic enthusiasm to declare Zambia a 'Christian

nation' to the consternation and chagrin of the other religions. President Chiluba also allowed Pentecostal/Charismatic churches to organize an 'anointing service' for him.

A similar event took place in Nigeria when the current president, Olusegun Obasanjo, took office. All these were media events exploited by the churches concerned to enhance their images as wielding divinely ordained political clout in post-colonial Africa.

Fundamentalist Gospel and the media

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity uses the media not simply as a tool for evangelization, but also as a means of articulating its theology of prosperity and success. In his 2005 New Year message to members of ICGC and broadcast on Living Word, Otabil told viewers, 'non of you shall live below the poverty line'; 'the blessing of God will bring you from obscurity to prominence'.

The gospel of prosperity, simply put, is the theological position that through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has made available to the believer all the riches of this world. Preaching from Psalm 103, Pastor Mensa Otabil submitted that, the psalmist acknowledges God as the one who 'fills my mouth with good things.' 'You need money to secure the good things of life', he said, 'so do not stop making demands on God until your mouth is filled with good things.'

Material prosperity is thus considered a key outward sign of God's favour and in articulating this message, Pentecostal/Charismatic pastors draw heavily on biblical texts that speak of material blessings.

This message cannot be tied down to any particular denomination and therefore enjoys a wide appeal. Many of its advocates are simply described as 'motivational' or 'inspirational' speakers. Based on the Bible, they simply outline very practical 'principles' about how to make good the opportunities that God gives to us in life through investments, education, and diversification of business interests. The media are thus used in very innovative ways by these Pentecostal/Charismatic churches.

To illustrate this with the case of Ghana, they have an intriguing range of sponsored programmes: Royal House Chapel: Power in His Presence; Word Miracle Church International: Your Miracle Encounter and God's Miracle Hour; Christian Action Faith Ministries International: Voice of

Inspiration. Each of these programmes has a radio counterpart and the situation is pretty much the same across the sub-region.

A number of churches belonging to the charismatic streams also broadcast their services in several West African countries. These include the programmes of Prophet T. B. Joshua of the Synagogue Church of All Nations, and Winning Ways hosted by London-based Nigerian pastor of the Kingsway International Christian Centre, Matthew Ashimolowo.

The use of the media by Africa's new Christianities goes beyond radio and television. There is currently a booming home video-film industry in West Africa and of the various issues that the storylines deal with, religion, especially the appropriation of Pentecostal/Charismatic idiom of power against supernatural evil is the dominant theme. In Nigeria a number of these films are actually sponsored by Pentecostal/Churches as an evangelical propagandist tool.

In these films Pentecostal/Charismatic pastors are given the image of being anointed by God to break the power of the devil – often symbolized by the priests of traditional religions. The 'demonization' of traditional religions and indeed other non-Christian faiths is very prominent in Pentecostal/Charismatic rhetoric, and this is also present in their media programmes. This negative portrayal of other religions in the media has led to violent clashes between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, and between Christians and traditional religious practitioners in Ghana.

Innovative uses of the media

Throughout Africa's cities, Pentecostal/Charismatic churches also make available street overhead banners, glossy wall posters and handbills, and newspaper and magazine advertisements for impending programmes. The posters and handbills are very colourful and feature pastors, sometimes wives, and local and foreign guests at revival meetings, dubbed summits or conferences.

The churches also make available, at the beginning of every year, car bumper and fridge stickers that announce the hopes and aspirations of the members for a particular year. The writings include: '2005: My year of financial success', 'My year of breakthrough', 'My year of empowerment', 'My year of increase', 'My year of exploits', 'My year of promotion', 'My year of expansion', 'My year of prosperity', 'My year of success', and so on.

The titles of books published by charismatic pastors similarly focus on success such as

Archbishop Duncan-Williams' *You are Destined to Succeed* and Mensa Otabil's *Enjoying the Blessings of Abraham*. Video and audiocassette tapes bearing these messages also circulate widely in sub-Saharan Africa. Considered as 'points of contact' with the divine, as one Nigerian author explains, these tapes function as purveyors of miracles and fortunes. They serve as extensions of church services and preaching, and as 'a sort of surrogate authority on matters of religious, social and ethical values.'¹

Whether we are looking at titles and contents of tapes, books and sermons, banners, posters, handbills, TV and newspaper advertisements, or car bumper stickers, the images and expressions are carefully crafted to portray and speak of what is often cast in sermons as biblical prosperity. In this message of success, potential and possibility, the new churches depart significantly from the historic mission churches and classical Pentecostal denominations, for whom the ideal marks of the Christian are not so much what a person has but the moral traits of humility and self-control in relation to the 'things of the world'.

The prosperity advocated by the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches certainly includes salvation from sin through the confession of Jesus as saviour. More importantly however, the most significant element is their radical emphasis on Christian salvation as encompassing material success and personal well-being. This emphasis resonates with African traditional ways of being religious, where prayer and religious ritual are also directed at the gifts of children, longevity, success in life's endeavours, and curses on enemies who may impede the realization of these goals. Where the two religions differ is the means through which such practical salvific ends are supposed to be realized.

On television therefore, the accoutrements of charismatic pastors, their wives, and the images shown reflect the gospel of prosperity that has come to be associated with their organizations. In this new type of Christianity, words have a performative effect so you must confess positive things to get them. At its weekly all-morning prayer service, 'Jericho Hour', on Thursday 10 March 2005, Bishop Saah of Action Faith Ministries asked members to make the following confession to their monies before placing them in the offering bowl: 'Money, money, money, wherever I send you, you will go. As you go into this offering bowl, return to me in USA Dollars, in Yen, Euros, Swiss Francs, and Pound Sterling.'

Such worldviews are also transmitted through the airways to the extent that television and radio sets have acquired their own magical and talismanic values. Listeners are often invited to touch these electronic gadgets as the anointed men of God pray through them in order that listeners may receive blessings. Others are encouraged to phone-in with their problems as pastors minister to them over the airwaves. Sometimes the TV or radio set even acquires a 'sacramental' status because people with various ailments are encouraged to place their medication, water, or olive oil on the set as the pastor prays over them for infusion with supernatural potency.

Media sponsorship as seed sowing

There is also a close relationship between giving and blessing in the prosperity hermeneutic. For example the media programmes need large sums of money to keep going, especially when it comes to hosting weekly broadcasts in the electronic media. A number of the prominent TV programmes are sponsored by secular business enterprises whose owners share in the mindset that as they give to God, their businesses will also prosper. The offerings are generally driven by the seed-sowing theology popularized by Oral Roberts through his TV ministry, which was available in Ghana until the early 1980s.

People give to God, or sometimes directly to the pastors, in anticipation of their own material blessings. Against the backdrop of the theology of the offering as 'seed sowing', businesses sponsor Pentecostal/Charismatic media programmes not only to take advantage of the wide audiences they reach but also by offering sponsorship, they are sowing seeds of faith through which God will bless their endeavours.

This is not a Christianity that makes much room for the poor, marginalized, and deprived, as far as God's blessings are concerned because to make it big in life, it is preached, you must first give in a big way. The pastor is the icon of success, a visible testimonial of the message of prosperity he or she teaches on television, the expensive suits and shoes, jewellery, and even the personal illustrations cited to drive home the message all speak of people who are doing well materially.

Fundamentalism and the reshaping of African Christianity

Paul Gifford notes, and in my view truly that the media presentations of these churches are moulding what counts as Christianity in contemporary Ghana.² The preaching of the 'Word' and the experience of the Holy Spirit in worship are the prime focus of charismatic Christianity. The aggregate meaning of the Word, as the themes of the sermons and advertisements underscore, is that there are possibilities to be realized in this life. In a competitive and liberalizing African economy, this message connects with the youth in the midst of limited opportunities in a continent that has virtually become a tragedy as far as the distance between its potential and real achievements are concerned.

Audio and videocassette tapes and books of charismatic pastors circulate very widely among the public. Members of the new churches are normally obliged to buy copies of tapes and books for their edification and education. In addition the extensive appropriation of the media, as I have noted, ensures that the voices of the pastors travel far beyond the confines of their congregations. As Pastor Otabil told his interviewer on Joy FM, the new crop of African church leadership is more

than 'hidden voices'. They are moulding the lives of those on whose shoulders the future of Africa will come to rest.

This is where the thrust of the message of the charismatic churches sometimes raises serious concerns. The practical aspects of working hard to achieve the desired prosperity in life are sometimes subdued by the emphasis on the use of anointing oils, prophetic prayer, and sowing seeds of money in the lives of pastors, their families and their churches as a means to prosperity. Much concern has been expressed by the public about how charismatic prophets during radio phone-in programs promise callers all kinds of breakthroughs in life, especially that God is going to take people abroad. Prayer requests for visas to travel to Europe and the USA rank alongside requests for healing in the new types of Christianities available in Africa.

Pastors do not feel accountable to anybody whether in the exercise of spiritual authority or in the use of church resources. One gets the impression that emphasis on materialism has come at the expense of promoting moral values at deeper levels and critics continue to point to the increasing chasm between the growth of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa and the dismal moral temper of the nations in which this is happening.

The strong influence of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in Africa is felt virtually everywhere in African societies. The sheer number of churches in town and the attraction they hold for Ghana's upwardly mobile youth is simply phenomenal. The media, as we have noted, have played a major role in establishing the new churches as the new face of Christianity in Africa. However, examining the media profile of these churches, the attitude to other faiths also tends to be insensitive in some respects. In the last couple of years, a number of them have realized that to maintain an enduring presence in the community, values such as tolerance, religious dialogue, emphasis on hard work, and social commitment, are timeless values that need to be given a place. The hope is that the new lessons might be taken seriously enough by all of them.

Notes

1 Asonzeh, F-K Ukah, 2003. 'Advertising God: Nigerian Video-Films and the Power of Consumer Culture'. *Journal of Religion in Africa: Religion and the Media*. Vol. 33, 2, pp.203-231.

2 Paul Gifford. 2004. *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.33.

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