

Media and fundamentalism in Nigeria

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If one is asked to characterise the current religious and media situation in Nigeria, two visible phenomena will be very hard to omit. These are: the proliferation of the churches belonging to the Pentecostal Christian denomination, and the dominant presence of their religious leaders in both the print and electronic media in the country. Conversion to these churches has been on a steady increase, with membership rising up to 20 million within a thirty-year period. There has also been considerable impact on the Nigerian media landscape.

Despite disparities in name and orientation, most of the Pentecostal churches¹ in Nigeria belong to the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), an organisation formed in 1991 as the umbrella body to incorporate '(all) christian (sic) churches, organisations and believers who believe, experience, practice and cherish the FULL GOSPEL message with evidence of speaking in an unknown tongue, in addition to their Evangelical Faith and practice.' (PFN, 1995: 2). The Nigerian Pentecostals claim that they proclaim the Word of God as set down in the Bible without compromise or adulteration. This uncompromising stance on things related to the Word of God clearly paints them in fundamentalist colours.

The name fundamentalist connotes conservatism, or rigid observance of religious doctrines. Evangelical fundamentalism arose as a reaction to the liberal teachings of the nineteenth-century higher critics and the subsequent movement known as 'modernism'. Fundamentalists saw themselves as defenders of orthodox Christianity against other evangelicals who were attempting to accommodate faith to the realities of the modern world (Synan, 1988: 325).

Marsden notes that central to being a fundamentalist is perceiving oneself to be in the midst of religious war. Fundamentalists are particularly fond of the metaphors of warfare. The universe is divided between the forces of light and darkness, spiritually enlightened Christians can tell who the enemy is. In such a war, there can be no compromise. (Marsden, 1991: 24) They see themselves as God's agents to put history aright. Fundamentalists are thus characterised by their militancy. They are not just religious conservatives; they are conservatives who are willing to take a stand and to fight to defend the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

The Nigerian Pentecostals are clearly fundamentalist on their insistence on purity of faith and conduct. According to one commentator, the Nigerian Pentecostals engage in a radical biblical literalism, combine the moral austerity of early Christian pietism with the millennialism and exuberance of modern Pentecostalism, but seek to anchor all this in a strict biblicism which reminds us of the European pre-reformation humanists (Okorochoa, 1987: 274).

Nigerian Pentecostalism can thus be equated with Christian fundamentalism because of the kind of belief system they propagate and their aggressive type of evangelism, which aims at 'winning Nigeria for Christ' or a 'Total Take Over' of the country, as one banner announcing a Pentecostal crusade in Port-Harcourt proclaimed. This fundamentalist posture of the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria raises a number of social questions.

Social agenda of the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria today

One of the major aims of Christian fundamentalism is the modelling of individual and collective lives according to a strict interpretation of biblical teachings. This remodelling implies a social agenda or an organized programme of group action. Fundamentalists, like revitalization movements, aim at introducing the new way proposed by their founders as the better way of life for the society (Wallace, 1969: 257; McLoughlin, 1978). In short, the goal of any fundamentalist movement is the establishment of a new society based on their conceptualization of the world and how it should be organized.

This is what the Pentecostal fundamentalist churches seek to do in the Nigerian society. The Vision of the Latter Rain Assembly, one of the major Pentecostal churches in the country underscores this social agenda:

'Our vision is: To raise a new society of persons unconditionally committed to the Lordship of Christ in every aspect of life (while) exchanging the values of the surrounding society as well as the world at large for the standards of God's kingdom.

A new breed without greed, and a radical opposition to corruption. An alternative society and counter culture to the kingdom of Babylon. A new social, economic and political reality which reveals the true nature of God's reign and the likeness of Christ through its renunciation of the world's definitions and tactics.'

This agenda implies making all Nigerians to undergo the Pentecostal conversion experience of being born-again, and on the platform of this experience to effect a radical transformation of the Nigerian society. This Pentecostal social agenda is made clearer by one of the leaders of Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria in a speech he presented to the members of the Fellowship in 1992:

'In Nigeria we can become a fantastic force for good. We can become the force of change not by

loving politicians, but by winning souls. If we do what God wants us to do, i.e. if we can get at least eighty percent of the people in Nigerian born again, you can be sure a Christian will be the president. You do not even need to spend a kobo to get them; you won't even need to be a rich man before you become president, because the people will say you are the one they want and you must be there...' (Cited by Ruth-Marshall, 1998: 308)

The ultimate aim of this social agenda is the creation of pathways through which the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria can ascend from the fringes to the centre of the national public sphere in order to assume control of the social hegemonic power hitherto monopolized by the State. With such powers these religious movements will be in the position of formulating national symbols and shaping citizens according to their vision of an ideal society.

Pentecostal strategies to empowerment

The Pentecostal leader's address cited above further indicates the strategy for taking over the Nigerian public sphere:

'Brethren, may I tell you that the strategy we are going to use to win Nigeria has to be the strategy of an invading army. When an army wants to take over a nation, they have certain characteristics; they don't make noise, like so many of us are doing.... Look at the ones who are really doing substantial work in Nigeria today.... They have started building churches, house fellowships are spreading, they are winning people all over the place... people who are working while others are sleeping and they take over the essential things, they don't just go and kidnap the president. They take over the media, the radio, the television stations, they convince the rich people, the businessmen, they get the students, they get backings, because when they take over it is the market women and the students they will tell 'come and demonstrate it if you are in support.' If you want to take over Nigeria you better win the students, win the market women, the media, the broadcasters, the rich, the poor and the press.'

The major strategy which is being adopted to achieve the Pentecostal social agenda is a massive presence in the nations' mass media.

The use of the electronic media for evangelism in Nigeria began in 1974 when Bishop Benson Idahosa of the Church of God Mission began television broadcasts on Mid-West Television. According to Andrew and Harriet Lyons, this broadcast was 'the first, largest, and most successful project in television evangelism in Africa' (Lyon & Lyon, 1991: 111). Idahosa was followed by Rev. Ayo Oritsejafor, who began the television programme 'Hour of Deliverance'. Another notable evangelical pastor involved in the electronic media at the early stage was Pastor W.F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church who used a tape ministry as an

evangelistic tool. It was in the 1990s, that the Pentecostal application of the electronic media in Nigeria reached its full flowering, with many preachers buying air time on radio and television.

In Nigeria today, religious media are synonymous with Pentecostalism. There are a hundred and one preachers, healers, counsellors, exorcists, singers, belonging to this Christian denomination, who buy air time on national, local and private radios and televisions to proclaim their fundamentalist message. Some also pay for space in newspapers to publish their messages. The most notable figures among them are: Tunde Bakare of the Later Day Assembly; Chris Oyakilome of Christ Embassy; Matthews Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre; Enoch Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God; Mike Okoronkwo of The Redeemed Evangelical Mission; David Oyedepo of the Faith Tabernacle; Taiwo and Bimbo Odukoya of The Fountain of Life Church.

The Pentecostals leaders follow a multi-media approach in their media evangelism. Apart from their radio and television programmes, many of them engage in the production of music cassettes and CDs. The booming home video industry in Nigeria known as Nollywood, is a new avenue through which the Pentecostal churches are disseminating their fundamentalist message. Brigit Meyer has shown the close affinity that exists between the messages projected in the home videos in Ghana, and that preached by the Pentecostal churches. This affinity creates what she calls the pentecostalite public culture, that is, an arena hosting a plethora of cultural expressions channelled through different media many of which resonate with Pentecostal views and morals and follow its style (Meyer, 2002). This analysis could be applied to Nigeria since a good number of the home videos shown in Ghana are either produced in Nigeria or are joint ventures between Nigerian and Ghanaian producers.

There is a close similarity in the content and format of most of the media programmes of the Nigerian televangelists. What is presented is almost always bible teaching, gospel songs, and miracle working. A few of the programmes, like those of Bimbo Odukoya and David Oyedepo have innovations, directing messages for a specific audience, but basically the Pentecostal preachers preach the Bible and perform miracles.

A second major characteristic of Nigerian televangelists is that they are leaders of a church, which in most cases they are the founders. The whole structure of the church and the media programmes revolve around the leader. This is in line with many revitalisation movements where the leaders are more than simple leaders but prophetic figures representing the movements. The leaders are symbols of identification for the adherents, and thus need to be the major focus of attention.

The third feature of Nigerian Pentecostal preachers and leaders is that most of them are well-educated. Some like Bakare and Okotie are trained attorneys. Adeboye and Kumuyi were university professors. Oyedepo is a professional architect. D. K Olukoya holds a doctorate in Molecular Genetics from the university of Reading UK. The high level of education and

intellectualism among Nigerian Pentecostal leaders and preachers is a remarkable feature, marking them out even from those in the United States. This high intellectualism mixed with the reputed spiritual prowess, increases substantially the influence that these leaders have over their followers. It helps them in the organisation of their church and their media programmes, and positions them better in promoting their social agenda in the larger Nigerian society.

Impact on the Nigerian media landscape.

There is no doubt that the growth of televangelism has impacted immensely on the Nigerian media landscape. It has become a veritable goldmine for most of the television and radio houses. It is estimated that about 40% of revenue accruing to both state and private owned television and radio stations derive from paid religious broadcast (Ojo, 1999: 8; Ihejirika, 2004). Most of these establishments would have gone bankrupt if not for revenue from paid religious programmes.

Before the advent of Pentecostal media, religious broadcasting has been provided as a form of public services by the various media houses. Today, because of the money accruing from the televangelists, none of the stations allocates space for public service religious programmes. The Programme Manager of the Nigerian Television Authority, Channel 5 Lagos, unapologetically notes: 'TV evangelism is for those who pay. There is no space for public service.' She then asked rhetorically, 'how can you invite people to come and preach when there are others in line waiting to pay for the time?' Mr Babs Fashina, the Manager of Programmes for Lagos State Television made the same point: 'We used to produce some Christian programmes before discovering that more money could be made from paid programmes'(Ihejirika, 2004).

This means that any religious group that does not have the financial resources to buy air-time is cut off completely from the nation's air-waves. This is in clear violation of Section 3,4 articles 1 & 3 of The National Broadcasting Code which stipulated the provision of equitable air-time and appropriate opportunity for all religious groups.

Another area which the National Broadcasting Code is being violated is the allocation of air time for religious programmes. Section 3,4 article 8 of The Code stipulates that not more than 10% of the total air-time or a radio or television station is to be allocated to religious programmes. In the early days of televangelism, what most of the stations did was to push all religious programmes to Fridays for Muslim programmes, and Sundays for Christian programmes.

Today, because of the overwhelming number of televangelists who are ready with cash in hand, most of the television and radio houses may be exceeding the 10% total air-time stipulated by the Code. Pentecostal programmes are now aired at any time and any day of the week.

The rapid growth of the Pentecostal media is making it increasingly difficult for the National Broadcasting Commission both to monitor and implement most of the tenets of The National Code. For instance, on a number of occasions, attempts have been made by the Commission to stop the airing of the programmes of Pastor Chris Oyakilome, the most visible and flamboyant Pentecostal preacher. The allegation is that his programmes carry unsubstantiated claims of miracles and healings, contrary to Section 3,4 article six of the Broadcasting Code which prohibits religious broadcasts promoting unverifiable claims (Ekenna, 2002).

These attempts have ended in failure because of stiff resistance especially from the private electronic media owners in the country who know how much income they will be losing if the programme is stopped. Despite all the threats and warnings, Oyakilome still appears on both national, state and private radios and televisions with his program, Atmosphere for Miracle.

Thus, because of the huge profit it brings to the media industry, the Pentecostal movement has become a major actor in the implementation of media policies in the country. It is easy for them to bend some of the rules and get away with it. The only major rule they have not bent yet is the one prohibiting religious bodies from ownership of electronic media.³ In denying licenses to religious organizations to run their own electronic media, the government expressed the fear that these media could be used to dominate religious broadcast in violation of the equal opportunity provisions of the Broadcasting Code.⁴

But these fears have been overtaken by the current situation of religious broadcasting, where as we have shown there is neither equal opportunity nor control over the content of the programmes. I believe strongly that it is only a matter of time before the Pentecostals find a way of persuading the government to reverse this rule.

Socio-religious implications

The fear often expressed by other religious denominations with regard to the domination of the airwaves by the Pentecostal churches is that such involvement helps them to win new converts. However, various researches have shown that televangelism does not win new converts to the Pentecostal churches (Hoover, 1998; Ihejirika, 2004). Such research has discovered that the televangelists largely preach to the already converted. The major role of the Pentecostal media in the conversion process is that it is a sign of identification of the converts with their church and its leaders.

The mass media also help to consolidate the conversion as it allows for internal debate among members, and the working out of a relatively coherent 'public opinion'. A born-again 'community of sentiment' is formed through reading, watching and discussing tracts,

magazines, videos; interchanges which entail the articulation not only of models of 'correct' behaviour, and new regimes of personal and collective discipline, but also new attitudes towards consumption, new dress styles, aesthetics, ways of speaking and moving (Ruth-Marshall, 1998: 294).

The socio-religious significance of Pentecostal media lies in the fact that increased visibility of their preachers on television, and their presence on radio, have elevated the churches from the fringes to the centre of the 'socio-religious public sphere' in Nigeria, at the same time giving them the opportunity to formulate public symbols and attitudes. For instance, the Pentecostal mode of praying has crept into many of the Christian churches including the Catholic Church.

Again, from time to time, at the beginning of major national projects, like elections, national conference, and even football matches involving the national team, political leaders invite the general public to embark on two or three days of prayers and fasting. There is also more invocation of the name of God by public officers in public discourses. These attitudes derive clearly from Pentecostalism.

The impact of the Pentecostal media on the Nigerian socio-religious landscape is thus, not to be evaluated from the functional point of view of how many people converted to the Pentecostal churches through using the programmes. Rather, the evaluation should focus on their symbolic role, that is, through them; people are able to articulate better the religious meaning of their lives. The televangelists act as prophetic figure, articulating better the meanings inherent in the belief system, helping people discover how to apply them to their individual lives.

Conclusions

Much as the Pentecostal involvement in the media has succeeded in elevating the movement from the fringes to the centre of Nigeria's socio-religious public sphere, it has not conferred on it religious hegemonic power par excellence. This is because the Pentecostal movement still remains basically fragmented. Though they tend to proclaim the same fundamentalist message, the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria is made up of a thousand and one churches many of which are founded by charlatans who are out to make money. Only a few of them could be considered as mega-churches with branches spread over the country. Thus, despite the existence of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, it is difficult for the movement to displace monolithic churches like the Roman Catholic Church.

It is also very clear that with the increase in prominence of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria with their fundamentalist messages, the other religions and Christian denominations have fallen back to consolidate their own ground and safeguard their own religious values. This is especially

true of the Muslims in the North. The introduction of Shari'a laws in most of the Northern states of the country⁵ should be read as an attempt by the Muslims to bolster their own identity in the face of what they perceive as growing Christian fundamentalism. Even among the other Christian denominations, serious pastoral measures are being adopted to counteract the growing Pentecostal influence.

At the end of the day, the Pentecostal churches may not succeed wholly in their agenda of bestriding the Nigerian socio-religious arena like a mighty colossus. But by projecting themselves as a major religious force to be reckoned with, they have acquired a big bargaining chip in the national public arena. They can now influence media and social policies, and even make significant contributions to ongoing efforts towards creating a new Nigeria.

Notes

1 The use of the tag 'Pentecostals' in Nigeria refers especially to the indigenously founded churches that derive their inspiration from the classical Western Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. It does not cover such classical Pentecostal churches like the Assemblies of God, and Seventh Day Adventist Church.

2 This vision is posted on the church's website, www.latterrainassembly.org .

3 In setting up the National Broadcasting Commission, the Federal Government stated that the Commission shall not grant licence to a) a religious organisation; or b) a political party. (cf. Federal Republic of Nigeria. Decree 38, 1992).

4 These fears were expressed in 1995 by then Director-General of National Broadcasting Commission. (See Tom Adaba. 'Private Ownership of Media and Church', Paper Delivered at the UNDA National Workshop. Benin, 23-26 August 1995

5 In late 1999, the governor of Zamfara State in Northern Nigeria announced the introduction of strict Islamic shari'a laws in the States penal legal system, contrary to the Constitution which recognises it as a customary law. This move was copied by about ten other states in the Muslim dominated north. This sparked off riots in many northern cities between Muslims and Christians. It was on the basis of these laws that the young woman Amina Safiya, who was accused of premarital sex, was condemned to death by stoning. The sentence was reversed due to global

outcry (See: Ihejirika, W.C. 'The Shari'a Controversy and the Future of Nigeria', Paper presented at the plenary assembly of the Nigerian priests and religious in Rome, May 2000).

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