

**PENTECOSTALISM AND MEDIA:
A REFLECTION ON SPACE CONTESTATION ON THE INTERNET**

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Abstract

The media is the vehicle of information dissemination and awareness. Print or electronic media appeals more to the senses of people more than any other means. For a product to be acceptable to the populace it must not only be well packaged, it must also be well advertised. The gospel has now gone global through the use of the internet. Advertisement tends to convince people as to why they have to choose between varieties of products in the market. Hence advertisement affects public opinion. Hence the Pentecostals have rightly understood the power of the media especially the electronic media to maximize profit. The church is now being packaged like a product to which the highest bidder shops for the best product. The church now packages their ministries and makes such as colorful as it can be just to appeal to the public. Marketing is so vital to the church now that the most viable means through which that can be done is through the use of media. What defines contemporary Pentecostal internet site is the targeted image that forces one to behold. The imageries on the sites explicitly portray religious leaders as icons of modernity and grace. The sacred seems not to be far away but is now saturated in the imageries on the sites. Hence, believers are admonished to hold on the sites as “a point of contact” with the divine for their miracle. The unrestricted exhibition of religious imageries through the internet depends on what they represent.

Introduction

In February 2009, I visited the Information Communications Technology (ICT) centre, LASU to access my mail. The ICT has one hundred computers for internet facilities. Beside me was an undergraduate student among so many others who was busy accessing a site. On closer observation, I found out the student was accessing a Christian Pentecostal site. This motivated me to further observe what other students were doing. Out of the one hundred students accessing the web, I discovered nineteen of them were accessing the website of the Pentecostal churches. One of the nineteen students was trying to order for the books of Bishop Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church Worldwide (LFCW) while another student was seen downloading the messages of the General Overseer of Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). Another student was simply watching a Christian Pentecostal programme online. He was following the proceedings religiously as if he was part of the programme. For instance, when the preacher raised a prayer, “Every forces of affliction and oppression fashioned against you be paralyzed, in the name of Jesus”¹, he answered “Amen”. This student in question was following the proceedings with a rapt attention. Pentecostal churches have a lot of offers on their webpages and the rate at which their websites are visited daily by the populace is phenomenal. In this paper we shall be reflecting on Pentecostalism and Media on space contestation on the internet

Pentecostalism

Anderson (2004) informs that Pentecostalism began just over a century ago and the movements continue to expand into the twenty-first century. Pentecostals believe in the possibility of the gifts of the Holy Spirit with great emphasis that the “Bible pattern” of baptism in the Spirit was an experience subsequent to salvation and evidenced by the ability to speak in tongues, performing of miracles (Ojo 2006:8) and manifest the other gifts of the Holy Spirit as stated clearly in the Bible. They claim the custodians of God’s presence in their liturgy, worship and personal lives, hence see the urgency to reach the lost souls of this world for Christ.

¹ See also, Olukoya, D.K., 1999, *Prayer Rain*, Lagos; Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries publication.

Historically, Asamoah-Gyagu (2005:10) claims that “the emergence of Pentecostalism worldwide has been interpreted as standing in direct continuity with the experience of Charles Fox Parham and William J. Seymour’s Azusa Street experience of 1901 and 1906 respectively. While scholars like Synan hold the view that practically all the Pentecostal groups in existence can trace their lineage to the Azusa Mission², there is evidence to suggest that not all Pentecostal outbursts around the world may be causally linked to North American initiatives. Nonetheless, a few members of the Christian Union in the higher institutions in Nigeria had claimed the Pentecostal experience of baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues which provided them a deeper religious experience in comparison to their earlier evangelical faith which were described as too old, docile and devoid of the resurrection power that the apostles of Old received during the Pentecost. Kalu (2006) however, traces Nigeria Pentecostal origin to a wave of charismatic movements that developed among the youths of various denominations in different parts of the country. Their main driving forces were evangelism and passion for the kingdom of God. Hence they set out to re-evangelise the mainline churches and also to win more souls for the kingdom of God.

Pentecostalism is so entrenched among the Christians that prospective planters of churches use Pentecostal identity to gather popular acceptance³. Kuponu 2007 reveals that Pentecostals enjoy immense recognition as many Christians openly identify with programmes organised by them. The power of influence of “evangelisation” in Pentecostal outreaches has often been hinged on the demonstrative effect of miracles claimed by some of their leaders and founders and they continue to have wider impact because of the contextualization of their emphasis and appropriation of traditional elements.

Pentecostalism is synonymous with the religious media. They follow a multi-media approach in their media evangelism. Apart from their print, radio television programmes, they maintain websites in addition to the production of leaflets, cassettes and CDs. It is an obvious fact that the Pentecostal churches and the media revolves around the founder or the leader as the case may be. The leaders are the symbol of identification for the adherents and thus probably may be the major focus of attention. The high intellectualism among the leaders makes them stand out and increases substantially the influence they have on their followers.

A very significant factor in the dynamics of the expansion and social appeal of Pentecostalism is the place and role of money in the thinking and formation of founders/leaders as well as members. This new “Christian culture” is concerned with ideas and techniques of generating wealth, prosperity and health for Christians who are not unafraid to name and claim what is rightfully theirs as members of the body of Christ. The “word of faith” movement or prosperity Christianity became popular among African American televangelists. Every religious leader and church founder in Nigeria claims a divine vision and vocation in establishing their churches; the ability to mobilize resources, specifically money is strongly tied to its potential survival and expansion. Hence they make strong appeal in the minds of both members and those targeted as potential members.

Pentecostalism has increasingly taken on entrepreneurial shape influenced by modern business and money management practices and strategies with emphasis on promotion, success, breakthrough, miracles and the members have constantly been applauding this with their regular attendance at such designated programmes. The strategies and methods of mobilizing resources such as money, time, free labour, connection and network are often influenced by the environment in which they operate and have their existence.

Media

One important characteristic of the new churches both in Nigeria and elsewhere is their involvement with the media. Pentecostal Christians are avid consumers of a diverse range of media products. The production, circulation and consumption of these media items have been severally pointed as part of the reasons for the popular appeal and widespread adaptation of the new Pentecostalism (Hoover 1988; Hoover & Lundby 1997; Marshall-Fratani 1998; Hackett 1998; Coleman 2000; Lehikoiner 2003; Ellis & ter Haar 2004:30-33; Mitchell & Marriage 2003; Asamoah-Gyadu 2004; Ojo 2005; Ukah 2003; 2004;

² Ojo (2006:10) traces Nigerian Pentecostalism lineage to Azusa mission.

³ There is a Zion Pentecostal church in Lagos. The church is a white garment church but has Pentecostalism in her identity.

2005a:285-313; 2005b: 101-109). The media, thus, features prominently in the new churches self-presentation and self-understanding such that, in order to understand the new movement, it is important to both describe and contextualize their media usage, that is, how they both produce and consume media items. Unarguably, in the Living Faith Church Worldwide (LFCW), the media fulfills significant functions in the dissemination of the leader's ideas and in the church's public self-representation and in the proselytisation of the frontier. What many people know about the church often comes from what they read in the church's media or in the news media generally.

INTERNET

We live in an increasingly 'wired' world, thanks to advancements in communications technology and the internet. The internet has now become a part of modern day life. Technology has found its way into every facet of life – even crossing the divide between the rich and the poor. Advanced models enable users to access the internet, send and receive e-mail and text messages, watch TV, listen to music, take photos, navigate by the Global positioning system and phone someone. Indeed we are witnessing the fastest global diffusion of any technology in human history.

The internet has thus become a veritable tool in the hands of the Pentecostal churches. They consider the internet as medium for Christian outreach. It has become the first high- tech communications device to have users assessing the web on a daily basis. Pentecostalism has become an important field of academic study with several publications now dedicated to that field. The Pentecostal churches are very popular items on the internet. Visitors to cyberspace can find official news about Pentecostal churches. These churches maintain websites.

However upon a closer scrutiny, one realizes that the impressive, informative, regularly updated and functioning websites are those of the Pentecostals. These churches tend to be much more evangelically oriented, mission minded and theologically innovative than the mission churches. The reason for this is not far-fetched. The Pentecostal churches realized that the internet is a veritable tool to further sell their messages and their materials. This is very visible especially on the websites of these churches. The books of the founder and that of his wife are always on display and visitors to these sites are urged to "order online", "download" or simply contact the church for assistance. The websites of these churches have thus become markets of some sort. The websites of the churches have become an extension of the church building where materials like audio messages, video, books and others emanating from them are sold to the public. One notable sight on the pages of these sites is a bold caption of the "General Overseer" or the founder and his wife. The pictures of the founder and that of his wife are always visible. The church of Jesus Christ was not designed to be a theatre where one celebrity performs and the others are just spectators. In most churches today, one lone star rises and others come to watch him perform.

The Pentecostals maintain extensive global networks and have a great appeal for the upwardly mobile youths. The Pentecostals are led by charismatic leaders, and charisma, as we know usually inclines towards increased following, visibility, exposure, influence and public presence. For them, the internet is a medium for "Christian Outreach" in fulfillment of divine mandates to capture the world for Christ. The internet offers an opportunity for people to maintain pastoral and religious connections. Through the web pages, the activities of the various churches and programmes are followed. People are usually encouraged to solicit for prayer support and offer their appreciations through the payment of tithes and offerings online. Therefore those that do not have direct contact with these churches can also pay tithes and give offerings online. These websites are carefully designed to serve as a source of information and Christian evangelical activity. They are updated to capture current events and activities of the church. Coming events and programmes of these churches are always on display; this brings people to the consciousness that they have a duty to attend. Non-members of the Pentecostal churches are always encouraged to be part of their programmes. An example of this is that of the Winner's Chapel: "Worship with us at Canaan land! Come and have a time of refreshing with us at any of our weekly services"⁴. They thus do not leave anything to chance as potential members can be added through this medium.

⁴ <http://www.davidoyedepoministries.org/> -- I-accessed the site in Ojo, Lagos on 29 December 2009 at 10.35pm

Reflections and conclusion

The Pentecostal churches are now well established on the global Internet. The worldwide net is an increasingly vital dimension of globalisation and is also an active theater of the Pentecostal churches. For example, one of the mega Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, the Living Faith Church worldwide also known by its moniker Winners Chapel is prominent on the Internet. She has updated and functioning website which has become a tool to further sell her messages and materials. The books of Oyedepo and his wife are on display and visitors to the websites are urged to order online, or download or simply contact the church for assistance. Hence the website has become a market of some sort.

From aesthetic point of view, one notable sight on the pages of the LFCW's website is the picture of her founder and his wife. The picture of this couple is visible and imposing, though, the picture is juxtaposed on the seated acclaimed over 50,000 congregation. The site offers opportunity to listen to the past sermons of the founder and the weekly exposition of the wife on Christian Family. The church is very unique and dynamic in that change to her is a constant factor. I observed that at any point a major event is around the corner, the website is updated to accommodate such an event. For example, the Shiloh, which was tagged "Manifestation 2009", the seasoning greetings from David Oyedepo Ministries Worldwide with the tag, "Restoration 2010- 'Prepare your mind for God in 2010'", to mention few. Books of the founder are recommended monthly for reading. For example in the month of December, four books were recommended- "Walking in the newness of Life", "Walking in the miraculous", "Understanding your covenant rights" and "All you need to have all your need are met".

Another major example is the Latter Rain Assembly which has the religio-social critic as Senior Pastor, Tunde Bakare. The Website is very colorful and has the photograph of the senior pastor and his wife visible and imposed. According to a caption beside their photograph, she claims "a new breed without greed", "a radical opposition to corruption", "an alternative society and counterculture to the kingdom of Babylon", "set apart for his special purpose" and "...More". This clearly shows what the church stands for and also her vision. This is always visible on the pages of the various websites in use by the Pentecostals.

The Internet serves as extension of church assembly. It is a medium that is currently receiving gradual attention from the adherents of Pentecostal churches. On the Internet wares are displayed and products are sold and purchased. It is also a medium for miracle seekers to get connected to the source of the church.

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