



A critical analysis of the social implications of gospel merchandising among Nigerian Christians today

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This article critically analyses the social implications of gospel merchandising among Nigerian Christians today. The research method adopted for the work is the qualitative phenomenological approach. Clerics of different Christian denominations in the country have maximised the opportunity of mass patronage from citizens seeking solutions to their spiritual, social and economic problems to merchandise the gospel and the associated religious elements. How this religious development affects the Nigerian society is the task that this article tackles. The article discovered that gospel merchandising has had both positive and negative implications for the society. Whilst the phenomenon has provided opportunity for competitive propagation of the gospel in the Nigerian society as well as employment for the unemployed, especially the youths, it is observed that the same phenomenon has affected the society negatively by encouraging the gangrenous social sickness known as corruption and by influencing the general trend of diabolism and immorality in the society. The study recommends, among other things, that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should cooperate with the government so that its war against corruption could be carried into the church as it has been observed that the unwholesome phenomenon is also endemic in the church in no small measure.

Keywords: Gospel merchandising; Gospel; Merchandising; Nigeria; Christians; Materialism.

Introduction

Contrary to the instruction of the Lord and Master of the church in Matthew 10:8 'Freely you have received, freely you must give', some Christian clerics and gospel preachers go ahead to merchandise the gospel, presenting false teachings and deceptive practices in such a way that their followers would be compelled to patronise them. This phenomenon came into the Nigerian Christendom with the rise of new wave of Pentecostalism in the 1980s and it has become so common and extremely alarming nowadays. This assumption is supported by many scholars who lament that often there has been financial or commercial motive behind many gospel propagations in Nigeria. As Ugwueye (2002:221) posits, 'religion is now business which borders on commercialization or financial endeavours'.

Corroborating the above assertions, Nwadiolor and Umeanolue (2013) noted that:

Materialistic gospel message entered into Nigeria through the several visiting American materialistic gospel preachers and through their books, magazines, pamphlets and radio programmes. However, the question is, is it possible to drive away all those materialistic gospel preachers that have commercialized religion for their own interest in order to gain from it? These gains are evident in the selling of recorded cassettes of messages, prayers, counseling, performed miracles, testimonies, which they sell for them to have buoyant economy. (p. 34)

Jemiriye (1998) also agrees that many of the church leaders seem to have abandoned the precepts on which the church and other religious practices are founded; instead, they now brazenly pursue economic or commercial-oriented interests and tendencies in the name of preaching the gospel. Though the Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N) was formed as a political and/or watchdog organization to fight the anomalies, these churches seem to be stronger than the umbrella body who, like the toothless bulldog, have not been able to fight much.

The term 'gospel' refers to the core doctrines and practices of Christianity. In a narrower sense, gospel means the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ; hence, St. Paul in Romans 1:16

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defines it as 'the power of God for salvation for as many as believe'. In the context of this work, the term 'gospel' is used to imply Christianity and all that it entails, including the teachings and practices of the adherents. Thus, gospel merchandising here is meant to be any form of adoption of marketing strategy in offering the message of Christianity and all its elements to the inquirers with a view to make financial or material gain from them.

To merchandise means to sell something using advertising and other marketing strategies while merchandising refers to the activity of selling goods or trying to sell them, by advertising or displaying them.

Thus, the term 'merchandising' differs slightly from 'commercialisation' which implies to use something to try to make a profit. However, the two terms can be used interchangeably and are so done in this article. Ahmad and Eijaz (2011:186) agree with this as they see commercialisation as a relative term that can be defined in many ways, such as 'an integral part of the capitalist society to increase the profit through cosmetic and gaudy advertisement/marketing in the process of introducing or launching any product'. Religious merchandising or commercialisation has dual purposes: (1) for the awareness of the people for practising religion (2) for the exploitation and monopolisation of economic resources.

Nwanganga (2017) sees the two sides of religious merchandising or commercialisation as simply schemes to make economic gain. He explains the concept in two lights. Firstly, the application of commercial principles in the running of the church or applying business principles to church administration and running it as a business with the aim of making economic gain. Secondly, the manipulation of the church/Christianity and its services (spiritual and emotional) with implied intentions to exploit the members or prospects for economic or financial gain. He also describes it as conducting the church core mandate for soul winning and attending to spiritual and emotional needs of members with the sole aim of benefiting financially. For the purpose of this work, the researchers agree with those who define religious merchandising as whatever action that is carried out by religious personnel with a motive towards the exploitation of the religious consumers or any action with the prospects for economic or financial gain.

Gospel merchandising with its principles of prosperity preaching (advertisement) and proliferation of churches (displaying of products) has given rise to hatred, jealousy, greed, power tussle, etc., which have become the order of the day in many churches, especially among the leaders. As Global News (2012) puts it, selfishness now supersedes the love for others. Corrupt and fraudulent practices in the name of gospel propagation have assumed a central stage in many churches. It is on the basis of this ugly situation in the church of God that the researchers seek to examine in a broad sense the social implications of merchandising or commercialisation of the Christian gospel on the Nigerian Christendom and society.

Gospel merchandising in Nigeria

In Nigeria today, many churches have become centres for exploitation and manipulation of people for making economic gain by pastors and prophets. The root of gospel merchandising in Nigeria can be seen as what Kalu (2008) describes as the market theory. Kalu linked commercialisation or merchandising of the gospel to the market theory built around the idea that sees the religious space as being similar to the market place. He considered the Christian religion in the form it is being propagated today as a commodity because messages and other elements of the religion are being packaged as products in a competitive market place. Using marketing strategies, religious leaders find it very easy to dupe gullible consumers and adherents presenting their own 'religious product' as the best.

Nnadi (2012) completely agrees with this fact when he remarks that when our contemporary church establishes a school, the fees suggest that the school is made for the rich and not for the poor masses whose financial contributions the church used to build the school. When they donate relief materials to displaced persons, they create out of it an advert to promote either the pastor in-charge of the church or the church (particularly the denomination) itself. When they organise crusade, they attract crowd and create a kind of humus marketing atmosphere during offering, suggesting that making money out of the crusade is paramount. Pastoral visit has been turned into a clinic where people line up and pay consultation fee to see the pastor. Prayers are contracted for a fee which attracts a kind of prayer team to handle the prayer (If you want prayer team A to pray and fast over your prayer matter, you pay more than you will do for team B). Churches are planted and owned by pastors who presume that God through the Holy Spirit has called them to open their own ministry to the detriment of their former church. House fellowship is organised only in the houses of the rich with the aim of harvesting the money in their pockets (Iheukwu & Udechineke 2018).

In fact, the manipulation of the gospel for the purpose of material enrichment is played out in uncountable ways by business-minded Gospel preachers, including but not limited to manipulation of the gospel message, divinations, selling of religious products, healings and miracles, subtle threat, etc. (Essien 2010). These materialistic tendencies of most Nigerian churches create a doubt in the minds of people concerning the real purpose of the church.

People are made to believe that what prospers them is not their hard work but the level of the seed sown (Olawole 2005). Some of these preachers assure members that these seeds are for the expansion of God's kingdom and for evangelism, they end up using them to enrich their pockets. The truth is also being twisted to suit the ears of the people so that they can be willing to bring out their money just as it was found during the days of the prophets in the Old Testament. The congregation is also deceived by the way of divination where the so-called prophets make predictions for the future and make attempts to uncover the past (Onukwufor & Inyima 2018).

Another strategy used by gospel merchants is mounting of big programmes such as citywide crusades, where prophecies are released and special offerings are collected. To entice people to attend these programmes, attractive titles are used as themes for their supposed gospel messages. Big posters are used to advertise and publicise the programmes. Those who do not have enough money to organise big programmes resort to preaching in the streets and buses and demand for offerings to support God's work (Onukwufor & Inyima 2018).

People are deceived into buying wrist bands, stickers, holy water, miracle oil, miracle candle, magical handkerchiefs, blessed pen and pencils (Olawole 2005).

In some of the miracle healings, magical powers are combined with Christian faith. It is unfortunate that, as Adelowo (2006) highlights, very many of the so-called miracles today are mere fabrications intended to attract crowds and make money. Diara and Onah (2014) aver that the proliferation of churches today has risen astronomically, which suggests that the establishment of churches is considered to be one of the quickest ways to make wealth. The real purpose of the church, which is to win souls as documented in Mathew 28:19, has become relegated to the background.

The success of evangelism in Nigeria today is based on the amount of money made in return, not the number of souls won. Forthwith, the altar of various churches has been turned into a theatre art and a comedy show stage. Church leaders are much more interested in building sophisticated and highly decorated mansions. Powerful Evangelists today are known for the number of cars, buildings and wealth they possess; hence, leadership tussles, mismanagement of fund, immorality, magic and falsehood, corruption and fraud are thriving in the church today (Iheukwu & Udechineke 2018).

Social implications of gospel merchandising

Although the Bible condemns the attitude of merchandising the gospel in its totality, the phenomenon has many social implications both for the church and the society that are not altogether condemnable; hence, the implications can be classified into positive and negative dimensions. Nevertheless, the negative implications outweigh the positive ones.

Negative implications

The following are the negative social implications of gospel merchandising in Nigeria today.

Gospel merchandising encourages corruption and fraud in the society

Gospel merchandising among Nigerian Christians has directly or indirectly promoted corruption and fraud in the country. Miracles are counterfeited and miracle workers are emerging in their numbers, using all sorts of dubious and corrupt means to make money from their followers. In this period of uncertainty, poverty and insecurity in Nigeria, miracle and prosperity gospel has become the most cherished

product which attracts people to run around the so-called miracle workers. Men and women now troop to churches not for the improvement of their spiritual lives but for the reason that they can receive messages that will assure them good health and financial open doors not knowing that these messages are mere strategies for defrauding gullible people.

Gospel merchandising leads to rivalry and leadership tussle among church leaders and members

Impatience and insatiable hunger for wealth has led some junior pastors to oppose the leadership of the senior ones only to pull away and establish their own ministry or churches. One may call it the expansion of God's kingdom and proliferation of churches for effective evangelism, but as long as this is not established in love and mandate from God, it defeats the prayer and expectation of Jesus for the church which he founded and prayed that they may be one. It does not promote the healthy growth of the church as the Kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. This spate of church disunity as a result of efforts in merchandising the gospel has led to losing of Christians to other religions in Nigeria, especially to Islam (Onukwufor & Inyima 2018). Invariably, these rivalries, crises and conflicts within the churches are transmitted to the society; hence, members of these churches live and work in the society.

Gospel merchandising contributes to noise pollution

In the contemporary Nigerian society as churches scramble and compete for wider publicity and patronage, the problem of noise pollution in the country has increased. On a Sunday morning along most urban streets in Nigeria, one can experience a cacophony of sounds coming from drumming, singing, praying and preaching from the churches. The pastors shout on top of their voices even when they are using microphone and loudspeakers (Diara & Onah 2014). This results in noise pollution which has been scientifically discovered to have some adverse health implications.

Gospel merchandising encourages indecent dressing and sexual immorality

Christianity which was known in the Bible for high sexual morality has been devoid of sexual morality in the contemporary society following the materialistic and worldly attitude of church leaders and ministers. The Christian church has been immersed deeply into the immoral society born out of modernity. To this effect, all kinds of churches, where the so-called pastors encourage people to come as they are because God looks at the heart and not the outward appearance, are being established. This has made most of these church members to lose their sense of decency, decorum and virtue (Onukwufor & Inyima 2018). There are a number of stories about women and girls being sexually molested, abused and raped in the process of casting out demons or performing miracles. *This sexual molestation is generally assumed to be triggered by the indecent dressing of those undergoing deliverance, which is a source of temptation and seduction to the minister of the gospel.* Ejizu (2008) underscores this phenomenon when he opined that it seems that the more proliferation of the churches in Nigeria, the more Christians

experience decline in spiritual commitment, morality and practical Christian living.

Gospel merchandising leads to secularisation of Christianity

Sequel to the phenomenon of gospel merchandising, today the Nigerian society is witnessing a new religious order known as religious secularisation. Many of the churches are significantly engaged in the temporal and material affairs of this world as shaped by the Nigerian socio-economic order, which has facilitated rapid secularisation of the Christian religion. The implication is that the practice of Christianity in modern Nigeria is fast deviating from its intrinsic worth and value and assuming some strange systems which are at variance with its fundamental principles. Anything at all is now welcomed as part of the operational standard for the church and Christians are not alarmed at the ugly development (Onukwufor & Inyima 2018). If this trend continues, and it is most likely that it will, a time will come when Christianity in Nigeria will lose virtually all its features and will be fully subsumed into the secular society.

Gospel merchandising encourages divination and diabolism

Many native doctors have become wolves in sheep clothing, appearing physically like Christians and making divinations sound as prophecy to entice and extort money from people. These fraudsters operate and parade themselves as great men of God. Some of these so-called men of God threaten their members with sicknesses or death if they refuse to comply with their demands. They also craftily employ occultic means to manipulate people to ignorantly donate their cars, landed properties and huge amount of money to them. Even some actors and actresses have suddenly become prophets and pastors because they realised that church business seems to be even more lucrative (Onukwufor & Inyima 2018). On this, Diara (2011) writes the following:

... seeing that Pentecostalism is now one of the most lucrative businesses on [sic] the country, diviners and native doctors have decided to disguise themselves on the cloaks and garments of prophets and priests to deceive the poor and helpless masses who are desperate for one miracle or the other but who on the basis of their faith resolved not to consult the diviners and native doctors for solution to their problems. In this way, many people consult occultic and diabolic personnel today in the name of 'men of God' without knowing. (p. 66)

Gospel merchandising contributes to the resuscitation of obnoxious religious practices

Some obnoxious religious practices, such as human sacrifice and ritual killing, which were previously abolished by the missionaries, are being resuscitated in the Nigerian society as a result of various forms of craving for wealth, including gospel merchandising. To buttress this point, Uzodinma (2016) writes about three dead bodies discovered in the foundation of a church building in Enugu, Nigeria. The corpses were reportedly buried in the foundation of a church which was still under construction. This discovery, which was made on Monday, 25 January 2016, moved the residents of the area to

tears. This was said to be a sacrifice by a ritualist who parades himself as a man of God. It was meant to bring about faster and more prosperous growth of his ministry. The State Police spokesman, Ebere Amaraizu, who confirmed the report, said the corpses were recovered from the site following a tip-off.

Gospel merchandising gives rise to criminal activities

Murder, kidnapping and other criminal activities among church merchants who parade themselves as men of God have often been reported in the mass media. A case in point is the incident of the murder of the pastor of Wind of Glory International Church, his assistant pastor and a female member of the church by one Prosper Peters, his fellow minister, an evangelist, at Olokoru Umuahia. The evangelist, confessing in affirmation to his crime, said that he hired bad boys to kill the pastor because he refused to give him financial assistance, yet he was the one who took him to the native doctor that gave him power for success in ministry. His annoyance was that instead of helping him when he needed his assistance he warned him not to come around his church again for fear that he may divulge the secret of his power to his followers (Police Audio-Visual Release in MCL News). The murdered pastor was identified as Blessed Kelechi Iwuanyanwu from Mbanu in Imo State, whilst the assistant pastor was Ambassador Kalu Ikeagwu from Arochuku.

Ejiogu (2000) therefore rightly observes that a disruptive moral crisis has regrettably overtaken the contemporary Nigerian society as fake churches keep on increasing by leaps and bounds, parading millions of fake 'born agains'.

Gospel merchandising encourages quest for materialism

Most Nigerian youths are usually carried away by the preaching of these prosperity ministers. This has in a great way triggered the desire to wealth by any means possible, including rituals and drug paddling to mention but a few. True gospel requires that salvation should be preached and not materialism.

Positive implications

The positive implications of gospel merchandising irrespective of its numerous negative implications are the following.

Gospel merchandising serves as a means of tackling poverty

One of the major factors behind gospel merchandising in the contemporary Nigerian society is poverty. The level of poverty in the society is so high and very alarming and as such everybody is making effort to overcome its shackles at least in one's immediate family. Thus, gospel merchandising is one of the ways of tackling poverty in the society. Essien (2010) buys this idea when he intones that poverty is one of the major causes of commercialisation of the church in Nigeria. The high level of poverty in some churches has made some ministers of God to take to gospel merchandising. Such people resort to using various gimmicks to make more money out of the ministry. Nwadiakor (2015) in his list of various reasons why

churches are commercialised suggests economic hardship as one of the cardinal factors of gospel merchandising.

Gospel merchandising contributes to social, structural and infrastructural development

Gospel merchandising has brought about the employment of business strategies in running of churches in the Nigerian society. This has contributed to the physical development of the Nigerian society as evidenced by the many magnificent buildings used as worship centres, which translate to social transformation. In addition, most of the churches have one or two schools which they run in line with commercial principles where members and non-members send their children to be educated at cut-throat cost. Whilst some of the funds generated from these businesses end up in the church leaders' pockets, some are used to grow and establish the churches structurally and infrastructure-wise and by so doing Nigerian cities and communities attain higher level of grassroots development.

Gospel merchandising creates employment opportunity

Unemployment is also a major contributing factor to the phenomenon of gospel merchandising in Nigeria. Nwanganga (2017) underscores that because of long search for gainful employment, many frustrated people resort to pastoral work without genuinely being called by God. Some of them who possess oratory and communication skills open ministries that later metamorphose into full churches. This situation has led to proliferation of churches, which apparently fans the embers of gospel merchandising. This has helped in no small measure in placing food on the table of many Nigerians who also assist their dependants from the resources they gain from their church business. *Nigerian youths generally believe that its either one becomes a politician or a pastor to be rich*, a view supported by Obiefuna (2016). The choice of cars and lifestyle of these pastors go a long way to show that most of them called themselves and not God.

Gospel merchandising leads to improvement of the aesthetic condition of religious environments

The mad rush to Pentecostal churches where miracles and financial breakthrough are advertised has made many native doctors and diviners to put on the garb of Christianity and to transform their shrines into churches and healing homes in order to join the reigning church business. This invariably has translated to a decrease in the number of shrines with their cruddy environments in favour of more church buildings and healing homes with decent and attractive sites, thereby increasing the aesthetic condition of the Nigerian environment.

Gospel merchandising increases social security confidence

The establishment of new churches with the purpose of merchandising the gospel increases the security confidence of the citizens, especially urban dwellers. These gospel merchants use every available building, including uncompleted ones, for their church and ministry activities both day and night. This reduces the possibility of armed robbers and kidnappers using the same buildings as their dens.

Gospel merchandising breeds competitive gospel propagation leading to faster Christianisation of the society

Gospel merchandising in contemporary Nigeria breeds competitive gospel propagation, which, in turn, results in faster Christianisation of the society. It is on record that there has been astronomical growth in the population of Christians in Nigeria in the past two decades, with the result that Christians are now greater in population than the adherents of other religions in the country (<http://acs-Halia.org>). This can be attributed to the competitive gospel propagation leading to faster Christianisation which gospel merchandising has mediated in the country.

Recommendations

1. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should cooperate with the government so that its war against corruption could be carried into the church as it has been observed that the unwholesome phenomenon is also endemic in the church in no small measure as a result of gospel merchandising.
2. As has been noted, unemployment is one of the factors that have aided gospel merchandising among Nigerian Christians today. The Nigerian government should be encouraged by CAN and all in the corridors of power to help to create employment opportunities for the unemployed, especially the youths, so that they can be genuinely and gainfully employed.
3. Churches should also create more opportunities for their members to be employed within their organisations and business ventures. They should also provide soft loans that their members can use to set up individual businesses for their economic empowerment.
4. The government should set up machinery to monitor how churches and ministries spring up in nooks and crannies of the country and churches should be duly registered before they are allowed to operate. Law-abiding criteria should be listed as part of what qualifies a church or ministry to be established. The founders should be made to state their reasons for wanting to establish a church or ministry. They should also be made to sign that any violation of the social order will result in the shutting down of their ministries.
5. Activities of the so-called pastors and prophets should be thoroughly investigated and appropriately controlled by law enforcement agencies. Citizens should be taught to exercise their freedom of expression to report to the appropriate quarters whenever any minister makes attempt to defraud them by force. Those who are raped, sexually molested and abused in the process of casting out demons or performing miracles should report to law enforcement agencies.
6. Churches should rise to their God-given spiritual responsibility and begin to take matters of exercising spiritual gifts more seriously. Fake churches and Christian ministries take the centre stage in the contemporary Christendom because the genuine ones have failed to rise up to their responsibility of providing solutions to the problems of their members. Genuine ministers of God

should seek for God-given talents and spiritual gifts and use the same in the church freely without restrictions. If people receive solutions to their problems when they come to the church, they will not have a reason to patronise gospel merchants.

Conclusion

This article analysed the social implications of gospel merchandising in the contemporary Nigerian society into two opposite perspectives. Although there are seemingly positive implications of gospel merchandising, the Bible does not in any part of it compromise with tendencies to gospel merchandising.

Practically too, the phenomenon of gospel merchandising obviously has done more harm than good to the Nigerian church and society. It is essentially an aberration to the Christian tradition. It runs counter to the tenets of sacredness, purity and holiness of the Christian faith and profession. The worst of its implications include the promotion of corruption, fraud, murder and other criminal activities, and the resuscitation of obnoxious religious practices in the Nigerian society. Both secular and religious authorities in the country should therefore synergise to bring every tendency to gospel merchandising among Nigerians to a stop as it has been discovered that it is not only anti-Christian but also anti-social.

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The authors declare that no competing interest exists.

Author contributions

Both authors equally contributed to the writing and research if this article.

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