

## A CRITIQUE OF COMMERCIALIZATION OF RELIGIONS IN NIGERIA VIA THE MASS MEDIA

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### **Abstract**

*The concern of this study is the utilization of the mass media in the commercialization of religions in Nigeria. The study has tried to examine, in a concise manner, how African Religion (Afrel), Christianity and Islam, which are said to be the principal religions in Nigeria, make use of the mass media, such as the press, radio, television, audio and video cassettes, tracts, pamphlets and books for commercialization purpose. The study is comparative in nature. The materials are derived mainly from primary sources through participants' observations, interviews, and literary sources. It was discovered that both good and bad merchants of religions use the media. Among the identified good users were some ethical preachers, singers, poets, playwrights, and so on. Since the mass media are easily manipulated, as indicated in this study, and in view of primordial gullibility, the study recommends that the Nigerian public should be watchful and discerning of the pronouncements and deeds of merchants of religions who reach-out through the mass media. Since swindling is more often than not a suspect, the study recommends reliance on prayer, faith, and hope only, as much as possible.*

### **Introduction**

Ordinarily, religion, as a term, evokes the idea of the supernatural and the mystical, while the word commerce refers to one of the most mundane human activities. And so, the concept of commercialization of religions appears contradictory, if not out rightly negative. Yet, there seems to be no doubt that the three major religions that are practised in Nigeria (African Religion -Afrel-, Christianity, and Islam) are commercialized by some or many of their adherents in one form or the other. That is partly because, as Idowu notes, Nigeria is in the age of “get-

rich-quickly-and-plentifully.”<sup>1</sup> In his own study, Balogun observes that “the civic culture of corruption and indiscipline has engulfed the whole country”<sup>2</sup> (Nigeria).

These citations are of course general statements which tend to justify the generalized nature of this study. It seems worthwhile to examine merchants of religion as much as one can in a concise research, with the aim of providing some discernment for beneficiaries, victims and those who stand the chance of becoming victims of merchants of religion who use the mass media within Nigeria. Gullible persons can be seen to abound in Nigeria, as in many parts of the world. Korem wrote from the United States of America observing that “age, education, status in the community, and intelligence are not reliable factors when it comes to being taken in”.<sup>3</sup>

This study is comparative in nature. The methodology involved primary sources through interviews and participatory observation of several events and developments that have not been documented or critically examined. But library consultation was also adopted where applicable. The work is characterised by critical reflections on the data, generally speaking.

### **Commercialization of Religions Through the Mass Media in Nigeria**

This section highlights a worldview that religious enthusiasm and economic motive have very often been two sides of a coin. For instance, some scholars believe that the Western world adopted Christianity “as a camouflage to attract many other societies of the world to her commercial enterprise and material well-being”.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, many Christians who took part in the ancient crusades were accused of looting even fellow Christians.<sup>5</sup> And the Arabs who carried out Jihads in the name of Islam were accused of having done so for the opportunity to conquer fertile lands and improve their economic situation. Hence, they always seize the rulership of any land that they have “conquered for Islam”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, financial or commercial motif has very often been behind many Christian and Islamic propagation. Some priests and priestesses of Afrel also have their own ways of using their religion to make money; the fake ones in particular are said to be good at prescribing sacrifices that would be of benefit to them and not what the oracle orders.<sup>7</sup> Besides, some Yoruba

elders informed me that traditional Africans used to call on God and His divinities whenever they were going to war, including wars of aggression and occupation.

It seems that there has always been commercialization of religion in human history. As a primal religion, one can set Afrel as a typical example. In Yorubaland, participant's observations revealed to me that the devotees of the divinities, such as Sango, Orisa-nla and Yemoja do go around praying for people in the name of their divinities, and they are given money. Some adherents of Ogun divinity do it poetically and musically. During and after Egungun (masquerade) festival, some masquerades would go out praying, singing and dancing for pecuniary purpose.

Commercialization of Christianity in Nigeria seems to follow a similar pattern, somehow. In my experience, in the seventies and eighties, pastors, prophets and evangelists could be seen visiting homes and market places, preaching and praying for people to collect voluntary donations, or as it happens in buses and market places, the preacher may sell books or ask for donation in support of the mission. Even where tracts are distributed free of charge, the tracts contain invitation to the appropriate address, where those who respond will eventually contribute money, one way or the other. As Obiora notes:

When you go to see a 'man of God' who develops power, sees past, present and future, you pay the 'gate fee' and also the 'consultation fee'. That is only the preamble.<sup>8</sup>

It is necessary to remark that the situation is not different when compared with Islam. Gimba's admonition of his fellow Muslims is very revealing. He notes that:

The other kabaair of the Ummah is laziness. Our attitude to work is far from satisfactory. And begging, which is far becoming the most visible profession especially in the townships of Muslim communities is an offshoot of this poor attitude to work ethics. Begging is not a virtue, but toiling hard to earn one's livelihood is.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, when one sees Arabic school pupils (*almajirai*) and some adult Muslims begging particularly on Thursdays and Fridays in Nigeria, the impression is that Islam encourages the culture of begging. Quadri explains that although Prophet Muhammad introduced *sadaqah* (charity) “to inculcate the spirit of brotherhood and caring for the needy and the poor among Muslims”, Islam “discourages Muslims from taking to begging while it extols dignity of labour”.<sup>10</sup> Yet, since the at begging is done in the name of *Allah* (Islamic name for God) and Prophet Muhammad and some of the beggars hold the Islamic rosary, one can regard it as a form of commercialization of Islam. Religion is commercialized whenever a religious activity is motivated by financial consideration. Many Nigerians are currently involved in commercialization of religion and many of them do so through the mass media.

A history of mass communication media is presented in a book edited by Schramm. According to him, bits and pieces of the enterprise developed down the ages in various parts of the world until the media attained the current stage of massive development.<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that the Western world is the most advanced in terms of the mass media. Many relevant equipments and gadgets are imported there-from, as well as from some Asian, South American (especially Brazil) and Australian countries.

Commercialization of religion through the mass media might have started with Christianity, with the obvious purpose of popularizing the religion and particularly with the belief that popularity usually imports power and wealth. McArthur notes with specific reference to Pentecostalism that “through modern communication media – especially television – the charismatic movement has swept the globe and is expanding at a rapid pace”.<sup>12</sup> But many merchants of Islam have joined the fray. In the past, though the motivations were different, Muslims realised that they had to start building schools to arrest the conversion of their children to Christianity through the mission-established schools. As Ilori notes, Christian education which is disseminated through Christian schools “leads one to a knowledge of the Scriptures and of Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Lord”.<sup>13</sup>

Many Muslims now commercialize Islam through the mass media. Like their Christian counterparts, they would buy airtime on radio and

television to project and advertise their programmes and activities. They would sell audio and videotapes containing music, drama, homilies, worship, revivals and prayer. They would distribute tracts, launch and sell books. One can also read about them in the dailies, weeklies and magazines. Balogun quotes E. Bolaji Idowu as stating that:

There is no living religion that has not taken into itself elements from other religio-cultures. Influences from other cultures and contacts with immigrant religions have brought, not only changes in the complexion of religion, but also modification of its tenets. The most particular of religions have not been able to escape this factor: they have been forced by the nature of things to give and take elements to and from even those religions which they regard as their enemies or rivals.<sup>14</sup>

No wonder merchants of religions in the Nigerian context share similar traits. For instance, most of them claim to have solution to all problems; saying there is nothing impossible before God. Unfortunately, many people seem to “assume that everyone who claims an anointing from God is speaking the truth”.<sup>15</sup>

Every sponsored religious segment in the mass media is susceptible to commercialization, if only because such items have advertorial and projectionary potentialities. One could see through the mass media that, while merchants of Christianity try to sell their ministrations by appealing to the power of God through the name and blood of Jesus Christ, many merchants of Islam preach that miracles do happen by the grace of the Holy Qur’an, and prayer to Allah through an appeal to the honour of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Generally in Nigeria, an Islamic spiritual leader is perceived as a priest in Afrel who takes care of people’s spiritual, magical, and medical problems. Their most popular practice is to write with ink some Qur’anic verses on a slab, and wash it for their clients to drink. They are widely known for giving magical objects to people with spiritual problems. Oseni notes that some Mallams who pray and make charms for people in Afemaliland have been affected by “materialism which plagues the Nigerian society”.<sup>16</sup>

It is discovered that many merchants of Christianity do read some Psalms into water for their clients to drink or sprinkle for magical (or miraculous) effects. Some biblical scholars, such as Ogunkunle, actually believe in the imprecatory use of the Psalms to replace magic in African worldview.<sup>17</sup> But whether it works efficaciously is a different matter.

Some merchants of Christianity do give or sell sacred objects, in form of rosary, scapular, ring, chain, handkerchief, water and oil. At times, they would prescribe fasting for their clients. Sometimes, they would ask a person to go and bathe in a river late in the night. The “man of God” may or may not go with the person. An example of that is found in a report titled: “Nike Oshinowo’s Spiritual Secrets Exposed: Bathes Naked in Public to Win Men”. The magazine gathered that: “Whenever the prophet works for the ‘leggy’ Oshinowo, she immediately storms Abuja to test the ‘work’ by wooing and winning juicy contracts through her influential lovers, who after eating the forbidden fruit, compensate her by granting her request.”<sup>18</sup> There is no fear of contradiction that there are many “Oshinowos” in Nigeria, because if the prophets and prophetesses are not patronized they will not be mushrooming.

Coincidentally, more women than men could be seen patronizing merchants of religions, in Christianity, Islam and Afrel. Psychologists may be in a better position to explore the rationale for that. But a major lesson that one can deduce from the report on ‘Oshinowo’ is that merchants of religions need people of fortune to sponsor their spaces in the mass media. Definitely, some well-placed men are included. According to another report, when T. B. Joshua (a Pastor) celebrated his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday, his guests included a governor, an ex-minister, and ten traditional rulers, among other dignitaries.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise when Kris Okotie (another Pastor) launched his book: *The Last Outcast*, he said a man and his family gave him five million naira, not just for the book, but also because the man and his family “have been blessed by our programme on the TV called *Apocalypse*”.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the donor craved anonymity made him a suspect. It is not possible to know what he was doing for a living to be able to donate five million naira in one fell swoop. A Yoruba adage says: *Ìsale orò l’egbin* (the origin of wealth is corrupt). That is abundantly demonstrated in the story of Nike Oshinowo (above). The adage is also apt in the case of “Christ Embassy”,

founded and run by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome. In essence, it was reported that

In March, a Pastoral Assistant with Christ Embassy, Lawrence Agada, who's also a staff of Sheraton Hotels and Towers, Ikeja, was held over the fraud totalling N39 million. When he was interrogated by the police, Agada confessed that he used the larger amount of the money in helping the gospel in Christ Embassy.<sup>21</sup>

Another pastor, Akano, was quoted by the same magazine as contending that Christ Embassy, being a large congregation, it would be impossible for Pastor Chris to keep tabs on everyone. He submitted that since "the money was given for the work of God and not to Pastor Chris Oyakhilome as a person, whoever wants the money that Lawrence Agada stole and gave to the church returned should go and ask God for it." He, however, admitted that what Agada had done was wrong. He concluded by advising Oyakhilome "to show magnanimity of heart and see what can be done to assist Lawrence Agada".<sup>22</sup> Pastor Akano's remarks reminds one of the adage: "Birds of the same feather flock together", his final submission notwithstanding.

It seems that merchants of religions, whether in Christianity, Islam or Afrel are after money, and very often, it does not matter how they get it or from whom. And when this is related to the mass media, where a lot of money is needed for publicity, then, there is hardly any limit to the extent the merchants can go in their search for money. There is the reported case of a pastor who admitted being a patron to a gang of armed robbers. The report has it that

Pastor Omoregie denied going out for any robbery himself, but admitted enjoying from the loots, adding 'I sold two of the vehicles to some people. I normally give any vehicle brought to me to a spray painter to change the colour immediately'.<sup>23</sup>

Coincidentally, Pastor Chris Okotie alleged that Pastors T. B. Joshua and Chris Oyakhilome were "in fraudulent business", fronting for certain organisations, and so, they were "spending money that nobody knows

where they are getting it from”.<sup>24</sup> Okotie made the allegation in the year 2001 while the story of the stolen money that was given to Oyakhilome’s “Christ Embassy” happened in 2003. The basic claim of Okotie, then, was that the two friends (Joshua and Oyakhilome) were plotting to assassinate him.

Some other headlines include: “Fight in the House of God” over “proceeds of a thanksgiving”;<sup>25</sup> “Delta Police Nab Woman Pastor for Robbery”, she said “this is devil’s work”;<sup>26</sup> and “He was taken to Church for Healing, but he was killed: his eye was plucked, his nose sliced”, the Pastor told the police “that rats in the church must have eaten up the eye”.<sup>27</sup> Homicide for money-making ritual was suspected in that story. Published or unpublished, Nigerians are used to hear read about ritual killing committed by well-placed Christians, Muslims, and Afrelists.

### **How Religious Mass Media Users make Money**

This study discovered that successful merchants of religions do not have to indulge in armed robbery and homicide that relates to money-making rituals. In America, where the “prosperity gospel” is said to have originated, the objective has been to teach that prosperity has been won for Christians by Jesus Christ, and a Christian only needs to claim it by giving to God part of his fortune. According to a study by Gloria Copeland, as quoted by Gifford, the teaching is summarized thus:

You give \$1 for the Gospel’s sake and \$100 belongs to you. You give \$10 and receive \$1,000. Give \$1,000 and receive \$100,000. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10,30 is a very good deal.<sup>28</sup>

As Gifford further notes, in practice, giving to God means giving to “the man of God” who is preaching the message. And “this doctrine of prosperity-through-giving has proved very effective in persuading people to meet the expenses of very costly ministries”,<sup>29</sup> using the mass media, the television in particular.

Another effective approach to money-making has been identified in the Nigerian context by Wale Abiodun (2003:25). He notes how Pastor



Samson Ayorinde would say at his monthly anointing services, for example:

There is somebody here tonight whose business has collapsed due to evil forces. God has touched your business. Expect a big contract very soon. In the following anointing night, a man came to testify from Ebonyi State how he got a 605 million contract.<sup>30</sup>

To speak in general terms, with loaded language, as Ayorinde is reported to have done, while addressing several thousands of individuals, is to touch one person or the other accurately, and the person would think: “the man of God has known my destiny”, while in actual fact, what was involved was exploitation of life possibilities - saying things that sometimes happen to human beings in life, with the assumption that it must have happened or will happen to one person or the other in a big and gullible crowd. One can notice an identical tactics in some other multi-media evangelists, such as Enoch Adejare Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

There are many Muslims and Afrel spiritualists in the nooks and crannies of Nigeria whose activities are not exposed in the mass media. But hardly is there any religion in Nigeria immune to commercialization. Adekilekun notes, with particular reference to Islam in the south west, that “many mushroom Islamic organisations sprang up with dubious intention of gathering money”, and that in Lagos alone, “there are over 1,500 Islamic organizations”.<sup>31</sup> That was as at 2005 when he published his work.

On many occasions, Islam is projected on television and radio and Islamic materials are marketed in audio and video records. Many of the Muslim spiritualists combine African magical practices even when they claim on radio and television that they use only Al-Qur’an to achieve magical or miraculous feats. In that category, I can recall Eleni Tira (the one with a significant mat), Sheikh Akorede Ayeniromo, and Alhaji Garba Baba Asinmi, who I visited and saw people coming and going away with different magical elements. The radio and television advertisements by Alhaji Adesina Lahola Salasi and Alfa Sheik Omo Kaula also indicate that

they combine the Qur'an with African and/or Arabic magical practices. I could not visit Sheik Laula Onida Adura (the one with sword of prayer), but some informants told me that his prayer rested on some magical elements.

Sheik Ayeniromo made use of several radio stations in south-west Nigeria. His claim on radio was that whoever approached him needed not state his or her problem before he himself would know and begin to address it. In practice, the reality was different when I got to him. He asked me what the problem was. And when I told him, he gave me a date to call him on phone when. I called, he gave me another date. Henceforth, he did not pick my phone calls, and I had to give-up, even though he usually claimed to have solution to all problems. Of course one has to pay N1000 to see him, and I saw an ocean of people paying to see him for solution to their problems.

An interviewee related how he consulted Alfa Eleni Adura (the one with prayer mat) for what he considered to be a personal spiritual problem. The Alfa charged N8000 for magical materials and he paid. But it turned out to be a fraud, because the problem was not solved. Going by the Alfa's radio advertisement, he relied only on prayer, but in practice my interviewee said he saw no sign of prayer or magic. He then went to Alfa Eleni Tira who charged N6000 for the same problem, and also it was not solved. He said his previous experiences and discernment prevented him from going back to Alfa Garba Baba Asinmi who charged N5000 for the same problem.

The interviewee said Alfa Garba usually claimed on radio that he used water to divine people's problems. But, like my experience with Sheik Ayeniromo, he only asked what the problem was and performed no divination. He added that the Alfa was indeed not well when he got there. He said he saw his two cars parked outside his unfenced house, and they were in a state of disuse. But he managed to attend to inquirers, since he needed the registration fee of N1000 per client as usually charged by the spiritual problem solvers who advertise on radio and television. It is significant to note that what religious merchants claim on radio, television, tracts, and so on, and what they do in practice are not always the same, even when they invoke God to be their witness.

Another interviewee told me that in some cases, consulting the Alfas do work, but in many cases it does not work. I asked the opinion of an Islamic scholar/cleric, Imam Yakubu Abubakar Aliagan of University of Ilorin, who said nothing works except what God has accomplished. He did not believe in magical practices at all and I found that to be somehow strange. But a Yoruba traditional singer, Atanda Olaniyi, from Shaki, Oyo state, would agree with Aliagan, for he sang that magic is connected to *kadara* (destiny or pre-destination). Another Islamic scholar, Oloyede (1985: 90), holds that:

What is bad is sorcery, witchcraft or bad magic which are the misuse of supernatural forces. This clarification, we believe is rightly made by Mbiti thus: ‘They (magicians) use their magic power and knowledge for both good and evil purposes, when they use it for good they are medicine-men but for evil they are witches and sorcerers’.<sup>32</sup>

The clarification stands but one is used to hear that an efficacious magic is rare to get, except by luck or chance. Of course, several Afrel, Christian, and Islamic preachers emphasise that nothing works better than faith, prayer, and hope in God, since God is the *Alpha* and *Omega*. Such preachers enjoin people to rely only on God and not to fall victim to deception.

In a film by some Muslim youths on television (NTA, Ilorin, 2003), a particular Islamic cleric was depicted as a greedy person who used wicked charms to kill his opponents. On radio and television, one sometimes hears an Islamic cleric asking Muslims to approach Islamic clerics for solutions to all their spiritual, physical, mental and social problems. Quadri notes that many clerics “render spiritual services to their clients and commercialize some Islamic functions, such as ‘*aqiqah* (naming ceremony) and *janazah* (funeral service)”.<sup>33</sup> I spoke with two other Islamic scholars, Hashiru AbdulSalam and Abdul-Aziz Agboola who added *Walimatun-Nikah* (Marriage ceremony), *Walimatul-Qur’an* (Arabic school pupils’ graduation ceremony), and *Walimatus-Sahadah* (graduation ceremony to the status of a cleric).

Obviously, those who advertise on radio and television as pure Afrel spiritualists are much fewer than in Christianity and Islam, if only because the religion has become somehow esoteric (hidden) if not disappearing. I visited one Aare Aworawo (the Chief Diviner) who advertised on Radio Kwara that he had solution to all problems. He made a divination for me, and he appeared to be a good diviner. But my investigations revealed that he rarely solved any spiritual problem magically. An elderly woman said she took her son to him when he needed a spiritual solution to a particular problem. The Aare was said to have prescribed two sets of sacrifice and a magical solution, amounting altogether to about N20, 000, but it all turned out to be fake.

One Alhaji Sulaiman claims to be the Legbeji (Chief Magician) of Ogbomoso land in his weekly advertisement on Radio Kwara, and on Harmony FM of Radio Nigeria. But when I spoke with him on phone, he was not disposed to interview. I did not bother myself about it because some of my traditional informants told me that oogun (magic in Yoruba language) is an intractable art which another person can counter, find an antidote, or a surpassing spiritual means. Another thing that I often heard from interlocutors is that deception and fake magic abound and one comes about a genuine magical solution only by chance or luck. Yet, Offiong quotes several intellectuals, including scientists, who believe in the efficacy of charm (otherwise called magic).<sup>34</sup>

Obviously, playwrights and theatre groups commercialize Afrel through the mass media as much as any other person or association. That happens when they review their plays in newspapers, advertise or display them on radio and television, and as they sell them in audio and videotapes. Plays, such as *Sango* by Duro Ladipo; *Aye* and *Jayesinmi* by Hubert Ogunde, and *Kurunmi* by Ola Rotimi, are outstanding but many other fantastic plays produced in Nigeria also contain significant aspects of Afrel in songs, incantations, proverbs, worship, divination, and so on. Secular playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, and many theatre groups very often portray Afrel in positive terms while most Christian and Muslim plays more often than not project the religion negatively on radio and television. In light of the latter consideration, Tasie observed that “Whenever we have the so-called religious clashes in Nigeria, I would dare to posit that it is either because of bad Christianity and bad Islam, bad

Christians and bad Muslims or all of the above”.<sup>35</sup> That indicates that African Traditional Religion is basically a peaceful religion, while many Muslims and Christians try to malign it to make converts.

Another group that tends to commercialize Afrel through the mass media consists of merchants of African traditional medicine who advertise their wares on radio and television. Very often, they would claim that they inherited the medicines or “powers” from their ancestors, to whom they pay homage to ensure the efficacy of the products. This is purely African religious tradition. Ayanlola quotes Olubiyide Ogunyemi as saying that “We pay homage to elders. We take instructions from them. We prepare medicine, but they perfect it”.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, many Christians and Muslims are involved in the trade and they do follow the appropriate African traditional procedure.

The experience in Yorubaland leads one to affirm also that many African traditional singers, such as Lasisi Ayanyemi, Ayinla Adegoke (popularly called Adegator), Ogunlowo and Motewoola of Ado-Awaye, and some others, such as Sunday Adeniyi (popularly called Sunny Ade) commercialize Afrel through the mass media. With particular reference to Sunny Ade, one is not sure if he would still sing to pray to Ogun (the Yoruba tutelary divinity for those dealing in iron and steel) as he did in the past in such tracts as *Ogun Lakaaye* (an eulogy to Ogun), in which he prayed “*Ogun Lakaaye, ma ma je ka rija re*” (Ogun Lakaaye, may we not incur your wrath).

Among newspaper headlines that indicate commercialization of Afrel are: “There is no Magic in Ifa”;<sup>37</sup> “Americans Attest to Ifa’s Power”;<sup>38</sup> and “All Religions are Ifa-compliant”.<sup>39</sup> Ifa is the Yoruba traditional divinatory system of the Orunmila divinity, which is said to be God’s minister in charge of human destiny.

On regular bases, some Afrel festivals are publicized annually in the press, on radio and television, with the intention of attracting many people from far and near, with all the social and financial benefits that can accrue from pilgrims, tourists etc. Tumultuous number of persons coming into a town or village can create considerable commercial opportunities. Describing the events at the Osun Oshogbo festival, Olapade reported, for instance, that

The indigenes got a full taste of the clamoured dividend of tourism. Buying and selling went on for hours even at the dead of the night. Traders and little children trading on petty things like packaged (pure) water, bread, cigarette, etc. were still outside at past midnight. The revenue generated during this period can not be realised or come by in a month or two.<sup>40</sup>

He also touched succinctly on the pilgrimage aspect of the festival when he noted that:

Even before the festival was kicked off, people have rushed to the Osun shrine to perform private sacrifices and collect quantity of the Osun river water believed to be a remedy to all kinds of illness. Also some spiritualists who have been patronizing the grove for years were being visited by their believers, and I tell you this, people also reap from the fruit of tourism, as the seekers drop money for prayers to be said for them.<sup>41</sup>

The report is reminiscent of the river at Lourdes in France, where the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, is said to have appeared in the 1850s. The water of the river is believed to have “healing effects”. According to O’Carroll, “Lourdes is the most frequented shrine of our Lady in Europe, drawing many more than five million pilgrims annually”.<sup>42</sup> What is more, Olapade also has it that at the Osun Oshogbo festival, “foreigners outnumbered local tourists within Nigeria and the host state, Osun”.<sup>43</sup> That is true of several Afrel festivals in Nigeria, such as Eyo in Lagos, Olojo in Ile-Ife, Osun state, Argungu Fishing Festival in Argungun, Kebbi state, and Mmanwu festival in Enugu, Enugu state, as often related in the mass media.

### **Effects of Commercialization of Religions Through the Mass Media in Nigeria**

There can hardly be any doubt that commercialization of religions through the mass communication media has been very effective in Nigeria. Not only because the merchants of religions have been able to

reach Nigerians *en masse* but also because there is no better way of presenting gimmicks and manipulations as reality than in the mass media, particularly in film and television choreography. Besides that apparently negative observation, those who sell religious music and homilies in tapes have the chance of packaging their points neatly for the consumers, and they advertise them on radio and television. Unfortunately, what passed for a homily was on many occasions deceptive stories about miracles of healing and breakthroughs.

Through the mass media, merchants of religions in Nigeria have been able to attract a lot of followership and patronage. Many of them have achieved financial breakthroughs. Many of them have moved from rags to riches, living in the “comfort of God” or the gods, as the case may be. As one viewed many of the merchants of religion on television or video, one could see that they were rarely among the poor, even when they appeared to dress simply. Some of them could be seen to be really rich, when judged by their gorgeous appearances. Indicative headlines include: “Prophet T. B. Joshua’s Synagogue Splashes N18m on 38 Plots of Land: Plans to Build Multi-million Naira Cathedral”;<sup>44</sup> “Pastors Bimbo & Taiwo Odukoya Buy N250 Million Land”;<sup>45</sup> “Bishop Mike Okonkwo Renovates Church with Millions of Naira”;<sup>46</sup> and “Kris Okotie Squanders N30m on Presidential Project, Can’t Pay His Workers”.<sup>47</sup> One read that Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God is a “highly respected and humble man of God”, but his son, Adeolu, is said to live extravagantly in London, sparing no cost at all. A report has it that he “Acquires 500m pounds home, cruises in big cars with special Reg. Nos.”,<sup>48</sup> for instance.

It would seem that the mass media houses have not been focusing much on the financial fortune of merchants of Islam and Afrel, but, there is no doubt that some of them are materially successful. Some of them are polygamous and have a fleet of vehicles, aides and houses. Of course, as Bolaji Idowu notes in respect of the Yoruba traditional diviners, no authentic religion enjoins exploitation, but as he enunciates, we are in a period of morbid materialism.<sup>49</sup> Gbadero and Adeleye also note that “Today, corruption has eaten deep into our system politically, socially, economically, and regrettably into the religious sector.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, there is no

indication that any religion is totally sacrosanct in the circumstance in which Nigeria has found itself.

I gathered that many Afrel, Christian, and Muslim spiritualists who advertise on radio and television sell N1000 registration card to everybody who approaches them for consultation, notwithstanding whatever else will be charged thereafter. Obviously, that implies a lot of money for some of them who pool crowds with their attractive (though not always true) advertisements on radio and television. And from time to time they change their locations to virgin lands probably to escape notoriety and gain new booming patronage.

Many of those who commercialize religion through the mass media in Nigeria do not address matters relating to causes of poverty and underdevelopment, such as mismanagement of public resources, corruption and other forms of social anomalies realistically. With specific reference to merchants of Christianity, Gifford notes that

The gospel of prosperity tells the peoples of the world's poorest continent that material prosperity will be provided by 'a miracle-working God'. Thus the gospel of prosperity functions by diverting all attention from the economic and social situation.<sup>51</sup>

Probably because many of the merchants of religion diverted the people's attention from the socio-political causes of their plight, with particular reference to corrupt government functionaries, they usually enjoyed governmental patronage and support.

Very often, people who follow merchants of religions fanatically try to justify their action by saying that they believe because the "man of God" that they are following has effected this or that miracle. But, somehow, none of the few cases that I investigated happened as reported. For instance, a man who was said to have ceased using medicated eye glasses after being prayed-over by a "woman of God" was found using glasses still. A man whom I knew to be paralyzed due to stroke was said to have stopped using crutches, but it was not true. When I asked the daughter about the miracle, she replied that she knew nothing about the story that I was relating to her. MacArthur warns that we should not "assume that everyone who claims anointing from God is speaking the truth."<sup>52</sup> Experience and research have proved that to me.



The greatest challenge before those who commercialize religion dubiously through the mass media is probably that their nefarious activities are more readily exposed through the mass media to those who understand the power of choreography and gimmicks. That often mortgages their success and diminishes their followership to some extent. No wonder Christianity is said to have drastically reduced in number of adherents in the Western world of Europe, America, and Australia, where the mass media work much more pervasively. Efforts at resuscitating the past glory of Christianity in the Western part of the world are reflected in such books as: *Christ in Eclipse: A Clinical Study of the Good Christian*;<sup>53</sup> *Lost Christianity*;<sup>53</sup> *Claiming the Centre: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews*;<sup>54</sup> and *Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church went Wrong and What to Do about It*.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, some Westerners are heard describing the present age as a post-Christian era.

In the Nigerian context, there have also been some major studies on atrocities committed by some merchants of religion. Such studies include: *Heralds of Capitalism or Christ?*,<sup>57</sup> and *The Divine Deceit: Business in Religion*.<sup>58</sup> A report also has it, for instance, that some traditional rain makers that were contracted for “N2m” by Lucky Igbinedion, the Edo State Governor, to ensure a rain-free time for the concluding ceremony of the National Sports Festival, held in Benin, ran away with the money, after realizing that “their power could not subdue the down-pour”.<sup>59</sup> This report, as many others regarding financial and sexual criminal acts, can only ridicule many merchants of religion. Many of the reports seem to have put religion itself in a critical and skeptical box.

In his phone-in programme on Radio Kwara, on November 5, 2011, Olusegun Kosalamala, raised the issue of false spiritual healers and miracle workers generally who use the mass media to project deception. Many persons called to appreciate him and asked professional broadcasters to stop helping the charlatans to dress-up falsehood as divine truth. Although many could not express their personal experiences on air, they did not mince words that deception was prevalent. Sorrow came through from many of the callers’ voices.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined commercialization of religions through the mass media in Nigeria. It was discovered that commercialization of religions via the mass media is rife in Nigeria, with particular reference to Christianity, Islam, and Afrel. Through the mass media, many religious bodies project themselves. But media practitioners also report tricks and vices committed by many of the merchants, and that cannot but affect their long and short-term fortunes, somehow. As noted in the body of this paper, that explains to some extent why Christianity is said to have suffered decline in Europe, America, and Australia, which implies that the mass media can both make and mar religions. Since the mass media are easily manipulated, as indicated in this study, and in view of primordial gullibility, one would recommend that the Nigerian public be watchful and discerning of the pronouncements and deeds of merchants of religions who reach out through the mass media to separate the wheat from the chaff and not give in to deceptive claims and promises. Secondly, as some respondents opined, people who believe in God should rely on faith, prayer, and hope, as much as possible and not to chase shadows or fall victim to charlatans. Faith in God should be sustained particularly because efficacious magic is said to be rare and obtainable only by sheer luck or chance.

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