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Emerging Religious Marketplace in Nigeria: A Quest for Interpretation

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Abstract:

In contemporary Nigerian society, the evolving trends in Christian religious culture suggest that neoliberal (social) mind-set is influencing certain practices in many Churches. The objective of this paper is to examine how the above-mentioned contemporary culture influences current religious landscape. The sociological concept of commodification was adopted as a way of ‘reading’ this religious context. The research methodology combines theoretical and ethnographic approaches to this study. The research findings show that neoliberal mind-set is influencing how religious commodification shapes the characteristics of Nigerian Christian marketplace.

Key words: religion, marketplace, neoliberal mind-set and commodification.

Introduction

The reality of being established in a place, assurance of basic necessities of life as well as security from threatening unforeseen forces and observable circumstances guarantee human flourishing in any society. In many ways, religion and religious organizations have always shaped how human beings understand security. Therefore, the impact of religion as regards a better understanding of the dynamics of human security and flourishing cannot be underestimated (Lombardi and Wellman, 2012: 2). Hence, religion conditions variables of human security and also shapes social imagination of the people as regards this reality. In societies where the primal source that coordinates and promotes human security and well-being is considered to be divine, religious approach to human security and flourishing is expected.

The gradual changes in Nigerian religious and socio-cultural environments have paved way for the prominence of a Pentecostal brand of Christianity in matters concerning human security and flourishing. It is partly because this Christian religiosity promises meaning response to these human concerns. According to Kalu, Nigerian religious marketplace that was hitherto dominated by mainline churches as well as indigenous religions during and after the civil war is burgeoning with

presence of Pentecostal Christianity (2002: 675). There is no gainsaying that the post-independent religious marketplace has changed immensely due to urbanization, modernization, and abundant supply of Christian religious organizations. Hence, the influence of the changes in the socio-economic dynamics within the society on religious attitudes of the people cannot be denied. The objective of this paper is to examine how the above mentioned contemporary context and culture influence current religious landscape. The sociological concept of commodification is adopted as a way of 'reading' this religious context. In view of interpreting this emerging religious marketplace, the following methodologies will be used: firstly, the sociological concept of commodification will serve as heuristic tool towards understanding the cultural contexts of this study. Secondly, qualitative (ethnographic) method through administration, collocation and interpretation of questionnaires is also used.

According to Weeks, neoliberalism is a socially constructed project whereby individuals, freedom of choice, the forces of market society and minimal involvement the government stands out as very important factors that shape socio-economic development (2000:81). Minimal involvement of government as regards determining the market forces as well as dynamics of demand and supply is evident in deregulation. Through deregulation it is believed that competitiveness among related entities will enhance efficiency and that at the end of the day, the consumer will benefit more and the producer/supplier will make more profits. However, it is not generally the case that the consumer will benefit more since competitiveness is not for its own sake but for making of profits. In the same vein, Umuezurike's study shows that for many reasons, neoliberal deregulations have distorted the configurations of social forces in Nigeria through its reforms and the people are feeling the adverse effects of these distortions (2012:238). This is partly because these neoliberal deregulations of the economic life of our Nigeria was not ethically regulated. Hence, Raomse observes that non-ethical practices and irrational drives that defined profit-making ended up distorting the configurations of the social forces within the Nigerian context (2003:642). To an extent, this socially constructed project has influenced the organization of Christian religious institutions in developing societies like Nigeria. The burgeoning of neoliberal reforms in Africa since 1980s coincides with the proliferation of Christian Churches and Pentecostal organizations as well as the explosion of 'pragmatic' brand of Christianity in Nigeria. These religious organizations attempt to supply what institutional Churches have not completely taken care of: emphasis on the Word of God, miraculous healing, new way of worship, etc. From the foregoing, it is pertinent to say that: if the proliferation of churches is not regulated through an authoritative oversight what happened to the configuration of Nigerian social forces, after the deregulation process, may replicate itself in our changing religious marketplace.

Against this backdrop, the hitherto monopoly by the institutional Churches gives way to ‘unregulated’ liberalization of contemporary religious marketplace with attendant commodification of religious products. This cultural phenomenon seems to present Christianity as a commodity to be exchanged for something. Therefore, for some believers, religiosity seems no longer an obligation of faith but exchange for something. For example devotion to God in exchange for protection and prosperity, etc. Influenced by the logic of commodification and marketization, Christian sacred spaces seem to be manipulated by those who have the techniques of rhetoric, religious packaging and mass advertisement in view of wetting the religious appetite of ‘spiritual’ consumers within the competitive religious marketplace. This scenario makes some scholars to question the functions of religion in the society. Should religion be reduced to an instrument for complete elimination of human problems in a world that is not insulated from difficulties? Should religion rather help the society to cope with the problems the latter has generated. There is need to be engaged in this dialogue because in a society that is religiously thirsty, without a second look (discernment), anything can pass for a cup of water. In a plural religious marketplace where supply is much, in the sense of proliferation of Christian Churches that promise prosperity and freedom from many problems in exchange for *something*, the politics of commodification heightens. Thus, it is germane to examine the functions of religion in the society.

Functions of Religion in the Society

In human existence, the space covered by religion is as broad as that of culture and to an extent greater because of its referents to ultimate questions that transcend culture. For this reason, changing pattern in religious culture of any society concerns careful observers who seek to give phenomenological interpretation of what is happening within this realm. In carrying out this task, some of these observers seek the help of theories that will enable them to interpret what is happening in the society. Therefore, social theory on religion constitutes means to an end rather than ends in itself. Invariably, theories on religion should be viewed as concepts that sensitize and aid the interpretation of what is observed in the society (Wuthnow, 2003:22). Since these theories view the phenomenon of religion from perspectives, they can hardly be defined as universal deductive propositions that say *all* about religion. Pals demonstrates this in his *Eight Theories of Religion* (2006). In this volume, he recapitulates sensitizing concepts used by theorists of religion and culture to explain this phenomenon: Taylor’s and Frazier’s animism and magic, Freud’s link between religion and personality, Durkheim’s perception of society as sacred, Marx’s critique of religion as alienation, Weber’s conception of social action, Eliade’s reality of the sacred, Evan-Pritchard’s ‘construct’ of the heart and Geertz’s cultural system. Similarly, functional theory of religion shades light on

perspectival interpretations of human relationship with the sacred and how this relationship shapes one's daily choices.

In the view of Lidz, functional theory of religion suggests that religion informs, forms and shapes the values that are foundational to institutions that determine the ways each society is organized. This theory equally maintains that changing patterns in quotidian circumstances in any society conditions the way that people live their religious convictions (2010: 76). Even though Talcott Parsons (1902–79), an American sociologist is considered by some to be the founding father of functional theory of religion, scholars of religion need not forget that the rudiments of this theory were already present in Emile Durkheim's work on religion that points to the cohesive force of religion and religious authority as it concerns preserving the common good of the society (1995: 430–33). In Parsons' ground breaking work entitled: *Structure of Social Action* published in 1937, the polyvalent functions of religion in the society are explained. Victor Lidz summarizes Parsons functional dimension of religion as follows:

Parsons relates religion to social control, noting with Durkheim that members of society impose religious beliefs on one another. The attitude of respect for sacred things is obligatory; a person who fails to show respect is sanctioned. Religious rites engage the members of society in displaying respect for the sacred. In performing rites, an individual goes through special procedures to exit the profane world, engage the sacred, and manipulate sacred symbols. Religious ritual expresses ultimate-value attitudes collectively and what Durkheim called its "effervescence" strengthens "sentiments of respect" for them (Parsons 1937: 433–7). Feelings of respect give moral authority to ultimate values and the broader sets of norms, integrated with the values, that regulate the details of everyday relationships (2010: 77).

The above citation avers that religion has a very important role to play in the organization of the society — *it regulates the details of everyday relationships*. Social control that religion exerts over members of a particular society depends on a coordinated systems of core values that stakeholders and others in the community subscribe to and promote and hand-over to successive generations. The other side of functional theory of religion is that circumstances and cultural forces in the society influence religion in every epoch. This influence can, sometimes, result in modification or reinvention of religious traditions. Carrette describes one of the contemporary mind-sets that influences religious perceptions below:

The very conceptual spaces of contemporary life have become ideologically soaked in the language and ideology of the market. Neoliberal ideology seeps into the very fabric of how

we think, indeed into the very possibilities of our thinking to such an extent that people now live as if the corporate capitalist structures of our world are the truth of our existence (2004:170).

There is no gainsaying that neoliberal language and ideology can be used responsibly when sound ethical principles are followed. Commodification is closely connected with the market ideology; be it liberal or non-liberal. The reason being that without a commodity, market makes no sense. This work is concerned with how contemporary (neo-liberal) culture has contributed to commodification of Christian religion in Nigeria.

Religion functions as a means of shaping and re-shaping the social imagination of people in a particular society. In addition, the social context of the society reshapes the religious imagination of the people as well. The application of the latter will be demonstrated in the subsection on how commodification mind-set is changing how some Christians are re-interpreting their religious engagements. Before proceeding, it is pertinent to throw some light on the sociological concept of commodification.

Religious Commodification as a Sociological Concept

Some scholars consider the sociological concept of commodification to be a neo-Marxian critique of contemporary techno-culture wherein reification of reality in view of consumption and personal satisfaction becomes dominant. Within this techno-culture, goods to be consumed are material and nonmaterial. Since the major concern is man; commodification is anthropocentric. Hence, aestheticized commodification through advertisement, digitalization of information and consumables tends to influence the choice of individuals in the society (Ritzer, 1996: 296). When this is applied to Christian marketplace, religious faith and services are viewed upon as consumable products for the satisfaction of believer-‘clients’. This being the case, religious faith and services are to be presented as packages that are attractive and colourful to intending worshippers (as consumers). In the same vein, Kitiarsa argues that commodification

implies sets of purposeful acts to convert religious symbols and institutions into marketable and consumable commodity despite the fact that profit and other forms of material gains are often carefully packaged and subtly placed underneath. By religious commodification, I mean an emerging multifaceted and multidimensional marketized process which turns a religious faith or tradition into consumable and marketable goods. It is an interactive and iterative relationship between religion and market, simultaneously involving both market force

commodifying religion and religious institution taking part in marketplace and consuming culture (1991:565).

This relationship between religion and market principles is a very complex one. Thus it needs to be interpreted according to context and cultural history of a particular milieu.

According to Lokensgard, Marxian critique of reality states that human beings can change subjects into objects and conversely too through the logic of exchange-value and its reinterpretations; but Marx equally guarded against applying this logic to nonmaterial realities (2010: 38). This is because of its inherent abuses. The truth is that this warning is not always adhered to since humans have the tendency towards objectifying reality and when this happens, exchange-value is imposed on it. As a result, almost everything can be treated as a commodity – even sacred realities. This becomes a bit problematic when this objectification becomes people’s mind-set or a world view. Radin argues that within this context or world view, nonmaterial universe and symbols are commoditized in ‘metaphorical’ marketplace (1996: 1–2). Since this has to do with human beings and the society, religion stands the risk of being turned into a commodity and can be commodified.

But religion in its nature has always struggled to distance itself from the logic of reification. This is because, on the one hand, the logic of revelation presents the Other, that is, the Supreme being and his benevolence as gift in Derridian sense – this means: realities that resist the process of reification or objectification (Horner, 2001: 131). And on the other hand, reification tends towards possession of realities as ‘things’ and when this becomes inordinate, quest for control, greed and materialistic approach to life may set in. Hence, it is imperative for religion to be detached from materialism through negative attitudes like mortification and asceticism. In doing this, religion claims moral authority and credentials that enable the cohesion of the society towards the common good of all and discourage abuse of wealth meant for all.

Application of the concept of commodification to religious culture as heuristic tool seems conflictual for some and for others an aberration. Nevertheless, this work posits that to the extent which social realities in the society influence religious imaginations, perceptions and behaviour of human beings, the sociological concept of commodification can give a perspectival interpretation of contemporary Christianity within the Nigerian context. Similarly, Kitiarsa sees religious commodification as an important sociological concept and a complex religio-cultural phenomena that need to be understood through its contextualized tapestries of backgrounds, processes, and implications. He argues that:

modernization and commodification have either degraded or damaged religions. Rather, I suggest that religious commodification has

produced some lively and open landscapes of interpretation across religious traditions and societies. To some extent, religious commodification exists everywhere as it forms a crucial part of complicated human religious ventures. Indeed, the rise and fall of a faith is inseparable from its marketable qualities and entrepreneur leadership (1991:563).

Therefore, the social contexts for this concept are the socio-economic landscapes and changes that emerge in them according to certain historical forces within the society. The psychology of this concept is undoubtedly consumeristic. Consequently, in order to make the Christian faith ‘appealing’ to human appetite, ecclesial organizations have to pay attention to crucial principles that guarantee success of investments within any market-driven economy.

How then do religious organizations present their commodities to the society? Kitiarsa argues that religious commodities come in variety of forms based on their physical, cultural, institutional, and symbolic characteristics. Like other economic commodities, religious goods could be scarce, highly valued, historical statues, images, iconographies, etc. In addition, publications, music, and clothes form part of religious commodities embedded with economic use and exchange values. Other common ones are souvenir, stickers and postcards (1991: 570). Religious sites and pilgrimage hotspots also fall within logic of commodification because economic use and exchange take place there as well.

Some Salient Points Concerning Commodification and Religion

Firstly, commodification of religion is not new. The wise use of money or exchange value scale for promotion of religious cause is as old as religion itself. The challenge always lies in objectification and abuse of religious realities: material and nonmaterial. In Judeo-Christian context, an example of unregulated case of commodification of religion in the Temple is mentioned by the authors of the gospel. Here, one reads the consternation of Jesus at greed motivated reification of elements meant for sacral function (See, Matt. 21: 13; Jn. 2:16). The Medieval Church in Europe benefitted a lot from commodification of religion through the practice of penance and indulgence. Once again, the abuse of these religious practices was heavily condemned by the reformers and when the institutional Church finally responded to this condemnation a lot of damage was already done. Consequently, abuse of commodified practice of penance and indulgence contributed to the Western schism and the Reformation (McBrien, 2000: 1170). It is pertinent to observe that whenever commodification is not regulated or placed within the guidance of those entrusted with over-sight in religious affairs there is bound to be conflicts and abuses.

Secondly, contemporary religious commodification is a historical product of modernization. As long as this is partly a socio-cultural process, no religious community and/or institution can be completely immune to its forces. Concerning the functional theory of religion, it has already been observed in the Introduction above, that events and circumstances in the society affect the manner in which religion is perceived and practised. An instance of this is the adjustment of religious institutions and ecclesial communities to religious commodification through the forces of modern market system. However, in doing this, Christian communities are to be conscious of the bane of modernization while using its technologies for the mission of the Church. More so, there is need for a regulatory and authoritative organ that is well informed and this body should be entrusted with the regulation of the interactions between modernization and religious commodification. This is necessary because commodification complicates the worldly character of Christian religion and when it is too much it obfuscates its *other* worldliness.

Thirdly, consumerism is an important factor driving contemporary religious commodification. In a consumeristic mind frame, the immediate satisfaction of the individual's craving is primary hence consumables are presented in attractive packages that appeal to the senses. Similarly, religious rituals, messages, programmes and activities are put together in colourful and attractive ways. The place of worship is transformed into theatrical space with technological gadgets that render visualization and sound production awesome to the ears and amazing to the eyes. All these are meant to attract more adherents from other religious marketplace to one's Church or religious organization. With fierce competition among different suppliers of religious commodities, the Church that packages itself well stands the chance of making more 'profits' from the religious marketplace. Since satisfaction and personal fulfilment are crucial to consumeristic worldview, people move from religious organizations that cannot satisfy these needs to others that can. With this consumeristic mentality, 'going' to Church sometimes mimics 'going' for shopping. Ellingson indicates that megachurches understand and apply better the logic of consumerism in order to attract more persons than other churches and religious organizations. In addition, he notes that they draw from marketing strategies and entrepreneurial techniques of contemporary marketplace in view of 'selling' religious commodities that Christianity has in stock (2010: 247).

Fourthly, closely connected to consumerism is the logic and dynamics of the market. The behaviour of investors, money and managerial skills are central to marketization. In other to meet the demands of the market force, the behaviour of consumers need to be understood. Since capital creates wealth for the market, religious organizations need money for doing many things. Consequently, they need to have various sources of income generation for the Church. This being the case, there is need for check and balancing that will forestall excessive monetization of activities within the religious

realm because religious institutions ought to be non-profit organizations. Having made itself vulnerable to the dynamics of market forces religious organizations should know that they are no less immune to its scandals. Hence, they are to uphold high financial standards and principles. At this point, it is expedient to investigate how commodification shapes the emerging religious marketplace in Nigeria.

How Commodification Shapes Emerging Religious Marketplace – the Nigerian Context

In the above section, this research has analysed the concept of commodification and how it relates to the religious realm. This section will examine how commodification shapes the emerging religious marketplace within the Nigerian context.

i. *Branding of Religious Organizations*: In a religious marketplace where the supply of basically *same* commodity is abundant, branding becomes inevitable and indeed crucial to the successful operations of any of its participants. In this supply-demand driven religious economy, differentiation of sacred commodity that shares sameness in fundamental ways is very important. It is more glaring when the religious marketplace is highly competitive. Within this context, differentiation is chiefly achieved through branding since this trivializes sameness. In trivializing sameness, distinctive marks that separate one from the other come out. In the light of this, one can understand the reason behind the new graphics on the signposts of non-institutional Christian churches and neo-Pentecostal organizations. It is observable that most of the signposts of these religious organizations carry pictures and emblems: pictures of their General Overseer/President/Founder as well as the emblems of these churches. This phenomenon of branding generates psychological and relational affinity between a believer and a particular believing community. It evokes sense of assurance as regards the nature of religious experience that is possible within such a community and predisposes its members and visitors for a particular kind of worship. These signposts symbolically communicate messages like: ‘this is the church’, ‘this is the one’, ‘this is the man the Lord has chosen’.

The functional value of branding religious organizations cannot be denied: within a family semblance it distinguishes one commodity from the other, creates competition for the market and maximizes patronage (Knowles, 2001: 22). In Christian marketplace, all religious organizations share similar religious convictions rooted in the saving works of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the highly competitive marketplace makes branding of religious organizations inevitable. Among non-institutional Christian communities or mainline churches, the need for branding is telling; there are many reasons for this as Knowles highlighted above. Hence, one can say that unconsciously or consciously the neoliberal mentality of the marketplace is influencing the emerging Christian religious space as competitors reap the benefits of brandings and brand names.

ii. *Gospel of Wealth*: Another characteristic of emerging religious marketplace in Nigeria is the social imagination of God as a wealthy Being thereby attempting to downplay on poverty or economic deprivation as a reality for God's people. This neo-Pentecostal attitude resonates with the gospel of wealth or prosperity theology promoted by non-mainline churches: here, prosperity, health and wealth go together (Coleman, 2000: 27). In this religious marketplace, that is, in many non-mainline Christian communities, the crucifix or the cross is not mounted in their place of worship. These traditional religious symbols are rather replaced with the bible or representations of the Holy Spirit, etc. In this Christian communities, the cross or crucifix as a symbol of deprivation seems unappealing, yet its kenotic meaning and symbolism remain intrinsic to the Christian faith. Within the gospel of wealth mind-set, God's blessing is commoditized as: having business opportunities, buying fleets of cars, owning exotic cars and other means of transportation, amassing of wealth, etc. Offiong argues that the Founder of the Living Faith Church (a.k.a Winners' Chapel), Rev. Dr. David Oyedepo, has revolutionized the gospel of wealth with literatures on prosperity and the Christian faith. He writes:

Rev. Dr. David Oyedepo whose literature on prosperity has so far influenced many Pentecostal Churches and organizations in Nigeria notes that; wealth belongs to the Church for the expansion of God's kingdom. For him God believes in money. It is therefore ungodly for Christians not to believe in it (2012: 325).

In addition, Christian religiosity is seen as investment that should necessarily yield results in the here and now. This message appeals to the masses who are bastardized by lost opportunities engendered by dysfunctional democratic governance that does not benefit the governed but a selected few. Offiong mentions another popular evangelist in Cross River State who "concluded his teachings on prosperity humorously by referring to God has a 'businessman' who is ready to do business with believers" (325). Again, one can observe here how social imagination rooted in economics and market ideology is shaping God-talk: God as a businessman.

iii. *Non-Conventional Clerical Attires*: The clerical attire of personnel ministering in most of the non-institutional churches and neo-Pentecostal organizations is characteristically non-conventional. In the 'traditional' churches the conventional Roman-collar shirts is common and cassocks as well. But in neo-Pentecostal churches and organizations wherein the prosperity gospel is actively disseminated ministers of God dress like Executive Officers working with public or corporate institutions such as banks, etc. They look smart and good; in one word: they package themselves well. Offiong makes similar observation as follows: "The mode of dressing of these Pastors/founders depicts them as Chief Executives of some successful secular organizations" (2012: 325-6). The ushers (ministers of hospitality) are functionally similar to security personnel attending to people in the banks or other

secular organizations. Their mode of dressing resembles that of those working with public or corporate institutions. Is this mode of dressing a representation of capitalist culture or business model that defines the administrative strategies of these religious organizations? The adage: the habit does not make the monk still stands. Hence, they are free to dress in unconventional modes. Nevertheless, in the Nigerian religious space, the dress mannerism of ministers of God and other personnel in neo-Pentecostal churches and organizations mimics business-like models. This goes a long way to showing how neo-liberal and capitalist social imaginations are gradually influencing the perceptions of these organizations and contemporary religious marketplace. Good and smart looks of its personnel form part of the packing and branding techniques that work for these religious organizations.

iv. *Evangelization Programmes/Strategies and Proselytism*: The supply chain of contemporary religious marketplace as far as Christianity in Nigeria is concerned is not dwindling; the proliferation of churches or worship centres supports this fact. Following the concept of commodification and market-driven dynamics, churches need strategic recruitment programmes that will attract new members. Indeed, members are told to scout for new members. In the context of having new members, church members have to ginger or create demand for change of worship place among Christians who are not satisfied with the sacred nurture received in their churches. Since this age is characterized by insecure identities for numerous reasons: cultural and otherwise; the proselytize comes around proselytes as ‘someone who can guide them so that they become integral human beings in integral communities’ (Marty, 1999: 6). In most cases those proselytes are not non-believers in Christ; they already belong to a Christian community. To an extent, the results of successful proselytism means that churches or neo-Pentecostal organizations that take the mission of evangelization seriously are somehow capable of making new members through effective communication of Christian mystery to the others – mostly unsatisfied Christians.

v. *Positive Confessions Rooted in the Word of God*: Positive confessions spoken in faith is another characteristic of religious marketplace in Nigeria. In this attitude, the dynamics of reification is observable. The positive confession in question resembles the power of positive thinking and yet different from it because it objectifies God’s promises in the scriptures and enables a believer to ‘see’ a connection between what s/he believes and reality. This is also called the language of dominion whereby believers assert their sovereignty over created reality through the power of the Word. Unfortunately, this leads to a new form of religious fundamentalism whereby biblical claims are absolutized; when these claims fail to come true a person becomes alienated from ‘God’ worshiped in a particular locality and seeks a new association with another Christian faith community or ‘God’ who will fulfil his/her dreams. Since there is abundant supply of faith commodities in contemporary

religious marketplace, some Christians are not tired of changing worship locations, that is, rethinking belongingness to religious community based on personal satisfaction rather than holding on to familial religious traditions.

6. **Winners' Chapel: A Case Study of Calabar Religious Marketplace**

In his sociological study of religion, Ellingson observes that megachurches have arrived at an effective utilization of neoliberal marketing strategies in 're-packaging' Christianity as a commodity to be sold; the churches or places of worship are arranged in a mall-like setting. Furthermore, the megachurch commodities include: sermon series, music, church growth consulting services, etc. (2010:247). Nevertheless, it is pertinent to state that it is not only megachurches that are utilizing the neoliberal mind-set in the practice of Christian religion. In spite of this, the writer selected the Winners' Chapel, one of the megachurches in Nigeria, as a case study of contemporary Calabar religious marketplace. Consequently, the following is an analysis of the opinions of some members of Winners' Chapel (Ekorinim Branch) in Calabar on salient themes related to contemporary religious culture. These opinions were collated through administration of questionnaires.

A total of 180 questionnaires were administered but 160 were returned. 38.1 percent of the respondents were male while 61.9 percent were female. The financial status of the respondents is as follows: low income class – 21.9 percent, middle income class – 60 percent, and high income class – 18.1 percent. This shows that 60 percent of the respondents are from the middle income class.

Firstly, the art of advertisement is associated with the reinforcement of different brands of commodities within any competitive marketplace. From the foregoing, it is evident that branding of religious organizations is one of the characteristics of the emerging religious marketplace. One of the questions in this regard was: **'Do you support your church making payments for advertisements aimed at attracting more members to the fold?'** 130 respondents (that is 81.2 percent) answered Yes, while 30 of them (18.8 percent) said No. These responses suggest that a greater percentage of this neo-Pentecostal Christians are in favour of using advertisement tool, a neoliberal strategy, in the service of increasing church membership. Interestingly 18.8 percent of them who said No, seem to be traditional as regards optimizing church membership. This suggests that those who said No, might favour one and one evangelization strategy, witnessing, etc. A related question read: **'Do you agree with mounting of large billboards as advertisement strategy?'** 69.4 percent of respondents said Yes, while 30.6 percent gave a 'No' answer. This ancillary question suggests that a greater number of church members approved of making their church visible to non-members through large billboards. The dynamics of neoliberal marketing strategy has popularized large and colourful billboards for the sake of attracting the attention of consumers and clients. The fact that more church members are at home with this neoliberal mentality suggests that this contemporary culture is influencing the

religious perception that shapes emerging religious marketplace. There is a twist in this item. Another question read as follows: **‘Do you see mounting of billboards as commercialization of Christian religion?’** Interestingly, 43 percent of respondents saw mounting of billboard advertisement as commercialization of Christian religion while 57 percent did not see it as such. The twist lies in the language implication that associates billboards, commercialization, and Christian faith. Here, the report shows that more than half of the respondents refrain from associating Christianity with commerce while almost half of them saw nothing wrong with that.

Secondly, this work has carefully delineated the role of religion as regards human security as well the theme of commodification. The question of commodification of human security was captured in one of the questions as follows: **“Will you ‘pay’ spiritually for the elimination of a witch who is against your progress in life?”**. 56.9 percent of those who responded say that they will make spiritual payments that will guarantee the elimination of a witch who becomes a cog in their wheel of progress. But 43.1 percent said No. The Nigerian socio-cultural mind-set is conversant with the operations of the maleficent spirits and some believe that witches can cause retrogression of one’s progress in life. Since capital is very crucial to contemporary neoliberal logic and wealth creation, it seems that the 56.9 percent respondents were ready to ‘pay’ for the elimination of anyone that stands between them and their prosperity in life. It is important to observe that some understood spiritual payment as fasting and prayers while others thought of it as giving money – a kind of spiritual offering – concerning all that must be done in view of ‘eliminating’ a witch/wizard who stands against one’s wellbeing and security.

Thirdly, the practice of paying tithe, that is offering one tenth of one’s earnings or possessions to God is a Judeo-Christian belief. Gen. 14: 17-20, Num. 18: 21, Deut. 12: 14; 26, and Mal. 3: 8-12 support this practice. The socio-religious perceptions of some Nigerians belonging to neo-Pentecostal churches and organizations show that concerning human security and prosperity, there is a connection between religious commodification and paying of tithes. There was a 100 percent Yes response to the question: **“Are you convinced of paying your tithes to God through your Church?”** This response might have been influenced by prosperity gospel which lays emphasis on payment of tithes as gateway to financial prosperity. However, when they were asked: **“Do you pay tithes on gifts received?”** 57.5 percent said Yes while 42.5 percent responded No. This shows that more than half of the respondents pay tithes on gifts even though these do not constitute part of their earnings *per se*. May be they see it as possessions that come from God. In relation to tithing, one would take for granted that members will freely reveal to their pastors their monthly or yearly earnings. But a question in this regard shows a disconcerting response. The question was: **“Must your pastor know your exact yearly or monthly earnings?”** 38 percent said Yes, while 62 percent gave a ‘No’ answer.

Why did 62 percent of respondents objected to informing the pastor of their exact earnings? Does this mean that this percentage does not pay correct tithe? More investigations need to be done in view of knowing the reasons behind this response.

Fourthly, accountability and transparency remain a recurring decimal in neoliberal economic practices after the 2008 global financial crises. It was interesting to know the responses of believers – who live in a culture shaped by neoliberalism – to questions concerning accountability in the church. 7 percent of respondents said that their church publishes the account of offerings received but 93 percent opined ‘No’. To the question: **“Do you think the Church should publish the account of offerings and donations?”** 10.6 percent responded Yes, while 89.4 percent said No. The fact that almost 90 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that the Administrative Board of the Church should not be financially accountable to other members of the organization suggests that there are limitations of economic and sociological theories as regards the operations of neo-Pentecostal organizations that are more or less private properties of Founders or Presidents of these churches. In spite of the fact that most respondents did not call for the publication of church finances, 73 percent recommended that a board should oversee church finances at all levels. This means that they are interested in internal mechanisms that guarantee accountability and correct practices wherever church finances are concerned.

Finally, 99.4 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with the operations of the Church management. Yet, 97.5 percent opined that they can leave Winners’ Chapel for another place of worship if the church can no longer satisfy their needs. This response corroborates the claim that contemporary culture has influenced Christianity in such a way that for some, religiosity seems no longer an obligation of faith but an exchange for something. Only 2.5 percent of the respondents were ready to remain in that church despite all odds.

The emerging religious marketplace within the Nigerian context is undoubtedly complex, hence it seeks for interpretations. The writer made an attempt at understanding and interpreting this context through the lens of commodification and neoliberal dynamics. The findings from this study and the questionnaires are very interesting. Hence, the following suggestions could be drawn:

- Dialogues among the various Christian churches and organizations on the quality of faith, doctrines and social imaginations of Christianity in Nigeria is an urgent ecumenical need. This partly owing to the reason that proliferation of church can affect the quality of mission.
- Limitation of proliferation of churches through policies agreed by the government and Christian Association of Nigeria can checkmate certain excess.
- Collaboration between the state and religious organizations as regards using the wealth of the nation for the benefits of its citizenry can address the social ills of the society.

- De-emphasis on money in the churches and building religious education that squares with the Nigerian socio-economic realities can change the erroneous approach to prosperity.

Conclusion

This research shows that the emerging religious marketplace in Nigeria is gradually changing. This unregulated religious context presents believers and non-believers with many choices to choose from depending on their needs. The major neo-Pentecostal ministers seem to be conversant with the neo-liberal economics that drives the dynamics of packaging and sell of products. Thus they are able to present Christian religious products in a manner that attracts contemporary congregations; the responses collated from the questionnaires attest to this.

This study shows that in emerging Nigerian religious marketplace, expression of one's faith in a particular church is becoming a non-obligatory devotion. Allegiance of faith is less influenced by keeping one's familial religious tradition. For many Christians, belonging to a particular Church could be interpreted as exchange for something or satisfaction of their pressing needs. Therefore, some Christians trot from one church to another searching for something – a religious commodity that is tailored to their needs.

However, changing one's belongingness from one church to another for whatsoever reason is not an attitude peculiar to members of Winners' Chapel. It shows that the logic of commodification and deregulated religious landscape in Nigeria are shaping religious sensibilities of many Nigerians. The findings of this work suggest that this attitude is partly caused by the sense of insecurity and instability heightened by the dynamics of contemporary culture. Hence, the contemporary Nigerian context presents an opportunity for Christians to reflect on the implications of believing and living in a neoliberal culture where there is an abundant supply of various Christian brands without a corresponding oversight concerning what most of these churches are offering to believers in God's name.

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