Television and the Gospel of Entertainment in Ghana

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Abstract

Charismatic-Pentecostal 'media ministries' have become very successful in Africa's new media fields. They shape new forms of public religiosity that spill over into various forms of popular culture and resonate with broad audiences. This article explores the emergence of new Pentecostal publics at the intersection of media, religion, and entertainment in Ghana, raising critical questions concerning the relations between these domains. It analyses two different religious television broadcasts: a television ministry by a well-known celebrity pastor and a gospel reality show featuring a preaching competition for youth. It also considers the debates and concerns such programmes evoke locally. The analysis shows that Pentecostalism's employment of popular media and entertainment styles is an effective source of persuasive power, but also poses challenges with regard to binding people as committed Christians. The blurring of boundaries between religion and entertainment business causes insecurities about the authenticity of religious authority and religious subjectivity.

Keywords

Charismatic Pentecostalism, Africa, Ghana, media/television, entertainment, popular culture

Introduction

In many parts of the world, charismatic-Pentecostal churches are successfully exploiting the new media possibilities offered by the opening up of media fields as a result of media deregulation and technological innovation. Their 'media ministries' constitute new Christian public spheres in which Christian messages fuse with commerce and entertainment and media audiences are addressed as believers and consumers at once. This is not different in Africa, where the connection between Christianity and modern media is not new as such. Modern media have been integral to the presence of Christianity in Africa ever since the first missionaries brought printing presses with them. But since the 1990s processes of democratization and media deregulation in many African countries have greatly enhanced the public manifestation of religion in

mass-mediated forms. As formerly state-controlled media were liberalized and privatized, the airwaves became accessible to a wide variety of local actors and interest groups, including churches. New public cultures emerged, especially in urban areas, and religion came to occupy a central place in them.

My own acquaintance with Ghana alerted me to this shift. When I first stayed in Ghana in the early 1990s there was only state radio and television. Programmes were mostly national oriented, with an emphasis on information, education, and development. The representation of religion in the media was very limited. When I returned in 1998 the media situation had totally changed. Since the media were deregulated in 1992, numerous private, commercial television and FM stations had started operating. Programming had become much more varied, vibrant, and geared towards entertainment, offering both new local entertainment genres and more international programme content and entertainment styles. But what struck me most was that the media had become saturated with Christianity. On TV I now saw Ghanaian televangelists, gospel video clips, 'African movies' with a strong Pentecostal flavour and message,[1] and adverts for church events and sermon tapes. The new radio stations broadcasted preaching, gospel music, and church commercials, and had pastors hosting talk shows and phone-ins. In the cities, huge billboards, bus stop adverts, banners, and posters called attention to one or the other pastor, religious event, the power of Jesus Christ, or the need to watch certain religious TV programme.[2]

While Christianity has a long history in Ghana, I was struck by this sudden boom in mass media Christianity, and its close intertwinement with entertainment genres. With the new media freedom, pushed by neo-liberal reform, Ghana's public sphere had become a site of religiosity. Intrigued by these developments, I started a research project on the public manifestation of religion in Ghana. In particular, I was interested in the rise and popularity of the new variety of Pentecostalism brought by celebrity pastors through vibrant, entertaining mass events and effective use of media technologies.[3] Charismatic-Pentecostal 'media ministries' have become very successful in the new media

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[1] Birgit Meyer, ' "Praise the Lord": Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere', *American Ethnologist* 31/1 (2004), 92-110.

[2] Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Of Faith and Visual Alertness: The Message of "Mediatized" Religion in an African Pentecostal Context', *Material Religion* 1/3 (2005), 336-357.

[3] I use the term 'charismatic-Pentecostal' to refer to the new wave of independent Pentecostal groups and churches that emerged in Africa from the late 1970s to distinguish this new type of churches from classical Pentecostal denominations. They are also known as neo-Pentecostal churches or charismatic ministries.

field and shape new, public forms of religiosity that spill over into various forms of popular culture and resonate with broad audiences. I returned to Ghana (in several long and short visits between 2001 and 2008) for an ethnographic study of a charismatic mega-church, the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) of pastor Mensa Otabil, who has a well-established, multi-channel 'media ministry' and has come to be one of the most popular religious celebrities.

   In this article I explore the emergence of new Pentecostal publics at the intersection of media, religion, and entertainment in Ghana. The increased mediatisation of religion raises several questions concerning the relations between these domains. How to conceptualize the relationship between religion and media? And how to conceptualize the relationship between religion and entertainment? This article joins a growing literature that understands religion and media not as essentially distinct domains that now come to meet, but advances a broader understanding of media and mediation as intrinsic to religion as a practice of making the divine present in the world: religion *as* media.[4] Binding people to the divine, to religious authority, and to each other as a religious community, always depends on mediating forms. What is new about the adoption of new media technologies is not so much that religion now becomes mediated. It is the particular forms and styles of mediation coming with new media technologies and practices that reconfigure the ways in which relationships between believers and God, between pastors and constituencies, and between the members of a religious community are established and maintained. In particular, the use and circulation of modern mass media and digital information and communication technologies bring with them new forms of publicness. Analysing the emergence of religious publics in an age of mass media, then, addresses the question of how the entanglement of mass media and religion organizes people into new social formations and

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   [4] Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (eds.), *Religion and Media*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001; Marleen de Witte, 'Spirit Media: Charismatics, Traditionalists, and Mediation Practices in Ghana', Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam (2008); Patrick Eisenlohr, 'Technologies of the Spirit: Devotional Islam, Sound Reproduction and the Dialectics of Mediation and Immediacy in Mauritius', *Anthropological Theory* 9/3 (2009), 273-296; Matthew Engelke, 'Religion and the Media Turn: A Review Essay', *American Ethnologist* 37/2 (2010), 371-379; Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, 'Introduction', in: Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds.), *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, 1-25; Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, New York: Palgrave 2009; David Morgan, *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture,* New York: Routledge 2008; Jeremy Stolow, 'Religion and/as Media', *Theory, Culture, and Society* 22/4 (2005), 119-145.

modes of attachment that come to exist next to or overlap with older models of religious community, such as the congregational model.

In a context in which religious forces are increasingly expressed through commercialized media, it becomes more and more difficult to clearly distinguish between religion and entertainment. While acknowledging that religious performance always has (and needs to have) a certain entertainment value,[5] the drawing of religion into the sphere of media entertainment does pose new challenges with regard to binding people as religious subjects. With religious leaders making use of mass media and drawing upon formats and styles of media entertainment, new religious formations and forms of bonding emerge that are of a much more elusive and momentary nature than for instance church membership. Let me emphasize at this point that I wish to avoid a normative perspective that would devalue the mediatisation of religion because it would lead to watering down of the true message of God. Instead I propose an empirical approach that analyses the emergence of particular forms of religion and/as entertainment in a concrete cultural and historical context, investigating what types of religious expression are privileged and what types excluded by the dominant formats of the public sphere, what challenges these formats pose, and what concerns they give rise to for the people involved. What are the consequences of the religious adoption of the entertainment formats and commodity logic of television for engaging with religious publics? How does religion change when believers are addressed as media audiences and consumers?

After introducing the scene with a discussion of Ghanaian televangelism, I will discuss two different religious television broadcasts: Mensa Otabil's *Living Word* and TV 3's *The Pulpit*. The first is a television ministry in the strict sense of term, produced by the ICGC and broadcasting Otabil's messages as preached in church, albeit in an edited version. The second is something entirely new in Ghana: a gospel reality show, produced by the TV station in cooperation with charismatic-Pentecostal pastors, where youth between 12 and 16 enter an eviction competition and showcase their preaching talent. While both broadcasts thus centre on preaching the gospel, they seem diametrically opposed at first sight, with in the first case a 'real' and established pastor doing the preaching and in the second case children 'playing' or 'imitating' preachers. On closer inspection, however, things turn out more complicated. As a comparison of the programs and the discussions they evoked will show, it is exactly the

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[5]   Charles K. Robertson (ed.), *Religion as Entertainment*, New York: Peter Lang 2002.

authenticity of religious authority and religious subjectivity that become matters of concern as boundaries between religion and entertainment business get increasingly blurred.

Ghanaian Televangelism and Christian Entertainment

As in many sub-Saharan African countries, Ghanaian charismatic-Pentecostal churches have been booming over the last two decades. The charismatic revival in Ghana started in the late 1970s, stimulated by the new availability of foreign evangelical newsletters, books, cassettes, and television programmes, and by several mass conventions that foreign itinerant evangelists organized in the country.[6] From 1979 to 1982 GBC-TV broadcast Oral Roberts' *Abundant Life* every Sunday evening (free of charge), thus popularizing the slogan 'something good is going to happen to you'.[7] His disciple, the Nigerian preacher Benson Idahosa had already started his TV program *Redemption Hour* on Ghanaian television in 1977.[8] Kenneth Hagin's books came to Ghana through the Nigerian market and were very popular.[9] His messages also circulated on audiotapes, making his slogan 'you can have what you say' a source of hope for people in a time of deep economic crisis.[10] From the very beginning, then, this movement was closely tied to global networks of evangelical mass media. This not only made Ghanaian audiences feel connected to a global Christian public; it also influenced the contours of the Pentecostal movement as it developed locally.[11] In the decades that followed, locally established prayer groups evolved into full-fledged churches that developed their own media ministries and attracted exponentially growing numbers of followers, in particular among young educated upwardly mobile people in the urban areas, where almost half of all

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[6] Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*, Leiden: Brill 2005; Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy*, London: Hurst and Company 2004; Emmanuel K. Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*, Accra: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies 2001. For Nigeria, see Ogbo Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, in particular Chapter 6.

[7] Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 308.

[8] Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 298.

[9] Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 297.

[10] Larbi, *Pentecostalism*, 297.

[11] Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, Chapter 6.

Christians regard themselves as charismatic-Pentecostal.[12] But more than in numbers alone, the impact of this new type of Pentecostal churches lies in the strong public presence they have established, especially since the airwaves became accessible in the 1990s and churches could extend their 'tape ministries' into radio and television ministries. Their extensive broadcasting activity attracts broad audiences far beyond their memberships and influences not only other Christian denominations, but also non-Christian religions[13] and public and popular culture.[14]

Appreciating media as effective channels for spreading the gospel of Christ to the masses, most charismatic churches have a department that occupies itself entirely with the production, sales and broadcast of radio and/or TV programmes, audio and/or videotapes and CDs, and PR material such as TV commercials. In recent years, many churches have included social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and twitter in their multimedia ministries. Some have their own fully equipped media production studio and a professional media team. The financial resources needed to produce broadcasts and buy radio and/or TV airtime derive largely from their own constituencies. Charismatic churches successfully implement a doctrine of tithing and also solicit additional forms of money offerings from their followers, among whom successful executives, businessmen and politicians.[15] Elite 'clubs' within the church often play an important supportive role.[16] Apart from this, churches can fairly easily find corporate sponsorship for their broadcasts as their ability to attract large audiences makes them commercially interesting for business companies.

In Ghana's commercialized media field media entrepreneurship and Pentecostalism have become intertwined to the extent that, as the famous radio pastor Rev. Cephas Amartey of Joy FM put it, 'religious broadcast has become the bedrock of the media industry in the country.'[17] Behind this 'partnership' between charismatic churches and broadcast media, there appears to be a

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[12] Ghana Statistical Service, *Population and Housing Census 2000*, Accra: Ghana Statistical Service 2000.

[13] For an account of the influence of charismatic-Pentecostal media culture on neo-traditionalism, see Marleen de Witte, 'The Spectacular and the Spirits: Charismatics and Neo-Traditionalists on Ghanaian Television', *Material Religion* 1/3 (2005), 314-35.

[14] See, for instance, Asamoah-Gyadu, *Material Religion*; Marleen de Witte, 'Business of the Spirit: Ghanaian Broadcast Media and the Commercial Exploitation of Pentecostalism, *Journal of African Media Studies* 3/2 (2011), 189-205; Meyer, *American Ethnologist.*

[15] Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 143-145.

[16] Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 33.

[17] Interview in *Radio and TV Review* 28 (2001):57. For a more detailed analysis of this intertwinement of media entrepreneurship and charismatic Pentecostalism, see De Witte, 'Business of

close affinity between the modes of address, structures of authority, and ways of worship of charismatic-Pentecostal churches and the dominant formats and styles characteristic of mass media. Charismatic Churches' dominant mode of address is a mode of addressing the masses, or more precisely, the individual as part of a mass of worshippers. The communication of spiritual power happens through mass gatherings, spectacle, and theatrical performance. This fits the televisual logic of creating public spectacle and visual attraction to enchant the masses and addressing the individual TV viewer at home as being part of a mass audience. The format of an entertainment show with a host and a studio audience yet directed at a mass TV audience is similar to the format of a charismatic church service with a pastor and a local church congregation yet implicitly also directed at all those not-yet-born-agains. Indeed, Pentecostalism's strong emphasis on evangelizing the masses and winning as many souls as possible for the Kingdom of God, has given its main ways of transmitting religious knowledge and spiritual power an outward direction that is very similar to television's commercial logic of reaching an audience that is as wide as possible, targeting and entertaining as many potential customers as possible for the advertisers or program sponsors.

Secondly, charismatic churches strongly emphasize charisma and divine inspiration, rather than institutionalized power, as the basis of religious authority and leadership. This has its parallel in the emphasis of mass media, and especially in commercialized media settings, on personality creation. Denoting the gift of authority, the power to capture people's attention and evoke devotion, charisma links the persuasive power of charismatic pastors to the captivating work of audio-visual media technologies. Charisma lies in the ability of a pastor to project successfully an image of himself as an 'anointed Man of God'. Media are effective tools to this end. With churches thus making effective use of media to boost the charisma of their leader and manage his public personality, a new religious format has come to evolve around charismatic media personalities, thus turning pastors into full-fledged media celebrities with strong similarities to 'secular' stardom.[18] In a religious market place that is increasingly constituted by commercial mass media, celebrity becomes a powerful trope in the construction of religious authority and sustains these

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the Spirit'. In Nigeria, 40 % of the revenue of the Nigerian Television Authority comes from Pentecostals (Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 118).

[18] Marleen de Witte, 'Fans and Followers: Marketing Charisma, Making Religious Celebrity in Ghana', *Australian Religion Studies Review* 24/3 (2011), 231-253.

churches' message of success and prosperity.[19] Conversely, having a popular pastor on board is indispensable for the success of a media station in a highly competitive media field. Apart from selling airtime to churches, many radio stations have pastors or evangelists employed as part-time presenters, DJs, and talk show hosts, independent of their particular church. Most of them belong to a charismatic-Pentecostal one. The employment of pastors by radio and TV stations allows pastors other than the founders and leaders of large churches to become celebrities as well. They are frequently interviewed for entertainment magazines, present gospel shows, and are hired by various churches to host or perform on special occasions. These pastors are like a fish in water in the new celebrity scene created by radio, TV, media magazines, and live shows. They have the necessary charisma and know how to perform not only on the airwaves, but also during live shows.

At the intersection of media, entertainment and charismatic Pentecostalism flourishes the Ghanaian gospel music scene, which makes up for a large part of the entertainment sector and is sustained by both charismatic churches and mass media. The intertwinement of religion and entertainment in Ghana is not new. On the contrary, the relationship between Christianity and popular entertainment dates back to over 100 years ago. John Collins has described how Missionary Christianity greatly influenced the development of local popular music, dance and drama.[20] Protestant missionaries introduced European instruments and musical patterns, which Africans fused with local music and dance elements into transcultural popular performance genres such as highlife music and concert party theatre. Later, African indigenous churches incorporated various forms of popular entertainment in their worship services, mainly popular dance music, but sometimes also theatre.[21] The Kristo Asafo Mission, for instance, runs seven gospel dance-bands and one concert party.[22] This trend of incorporating popular entertainment into religious worship was thus pioneered by the African indigenous churches and it is carried on today by the charismatic-Pentecostal churches. What is new about the current situation,

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[19] See also Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 112.

[20] John Collins, 'Ghanaian Christianity and Popular Entertainment: Full Circle', *History in Africa* 31 (2004), 407-423.

[21] African indigenous churches (AICs), also known as African independent churches or spiritual churches, emerged from the 1920s onwards as a response to Europeanized Christianity. Longing for ways to express African cultural traditions in church, they incorporated many traditional religious practices. Unlike the European mission churches, the AICs employed drumming and dancing for worship.

[22] John Collins, *Highlife Time*, Accra: Anansesem 1996, 186.

however, is the crucial role of the mass media that have generated a charis-matic-Pentecostally oriented public sphere, in which charismatic-Pentecostal styles and discourses merge with entertainment culture and commerce and media audiences are addressed as believers and consumers at once.

Mensa Otabil's *Living Word*

Rev. Dr. Mensa Otabil is one of Ghana's most prominent charismatic-Pentecos-tal leaders. He developed an African liberation theology in response to the social and economic challenges facing Africa and Africans.[23] Otabil is the founder and general overseer of the International Central Gospel Church, which was founded in 1984 amidst the new wave of Christian enthusiasm and now has a network of 120 branches in Ghana and over 15 in Europe and the United States. He also serves as the senior pastor of the Christ Temple, the ICGC headquarters in Accra. Mensa Otabil is often seen as an exception in the char-ismatic-Pentecostal field in Ghana, not only because of his unusual Afrocentric message and social awareness, but also his rationalist critique of the spiritual-izing tendencies in much of contemporary African Pentecostalism. Otabil's radio and television broadcast *Living Word* made him widely known as 'the teacher of the nation'. The global circulation of his tapes, videos, VCDs, and books and his frequent global travels have brought him international fame as well. His Afrocentric message has gained him considerable popularity among African-Americans.

Otabil's renown took a flight with the liberalization of the Ghanaian broad-cast media in 1992. He was one of the first preachers to start a weekly radio broadcast, *Living Word*, on a private radio station in Accra and rapidly became a media celebrity. His media ministry expanded to include a prime time nation-wide TV broadcast on Sunday evenings, radio broadcasts in other cities, and a daily radio broadcast in Accra. Consequently Otabil consciously started addressing his sermons not only to his Christian congregation, but also to non-Christian media audiences. He successfully profiled himself as 'the teacher of

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[23] Marleen de Witte, 'AltarMedia's *Living Word*: Televised Charismatic Christianity in Ghana', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33/2 (2003), 172-202; De Witte, 'Fans and Followers'; Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*; Rijk van Dijk, ' "Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia": Pentecostal Pan-Africanism and Ghanaian Identities in the Transnational Domain', in: W. van Binsbergen and R. van Dijk (eds.), *Situating Globality: African Agency in the Appropriation of Global Culture*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2004, 163-189.

the nation' with teachings that address and seek to overcome the challenges faced by individual Ghanaians and Ghanaian society at large. His strong commitment to the development of the country, and in particular to education and entrepreneurship, and the clarity with which he voices his ideas have made Otabil very popular among audiences of diverse religious backgrounds, including Muslims. Delivered and broadcast as series of teachings built around one topic, such as 'Principles of Prosperity', 'Talent, Work and Profit', and 'Developing the Winning Attitude', many of Otabil's messages proclaim that the road to personal success is paved with is vision, knowledge, wisdom, responsibility, potentiality, productivity, result-mindedness, choice, action, and diligence, and neither with the faith gospel of 'name it, claim it, take it', nor with a fight against ubiquitous demonic powers. This message strikes chords with many people, Christians and non-Christians alike.

Produced by the church's professional media department AltarMedia, the *Living Word*'s main broadcast is Sunday evening at 6 pm on TV 3, Ghana's first private free-on-air TV station. The idea behind AltarMedia is to make everything that comes from the altar, that is, everything that is preached, available to the public in a commodity format. This started as a tape ministry right from the birth of the church. With the rise of FM stations, AltarMedia expanded and since 1995 Otabil has been on radio in Accra and later also in other towns. When TV 3 started broadcasting in 1997, AltarMedia applied for airtime and started telecasting *Living Word* every Sunday evening. By now *Living Word* is broadcast on three other TV stations in Ghana too, one satellite channel, and various FM stations in four Ghanaian cities. It is globally accessible via the Internet, on the church's own website, on YouTube, or as live-stream on mobile devices.

The broadcast opens with its signature tune, The Trumpet Shall Sound from Händel's *Messiah*, laid over a montage of footage from a church service. Otabil then welcomes the viewer from his office, introduces the message topic, and briefly recapitulates last week's teaching. The body of the broadcast is Otabil's church sermon, cut into two parts so as to fit the TV time slot of thirty minutes and divided over two weeks broadcasts. Since Otabil's messages reach new audiences through radio and TV he has changed his way of preaching. Adjusting his one-hour sermon to the TV time slot, he briefly revisits the major points after thirty minutes. Also, speaking with a media broadcast in mind, he does not so much talk to the Christian crowd in front of him, but to an imaginary non-Christian visitor to the church. Only the messages found to be suitable for the general public are broadcast and those deemed 'too Christian' are not selected. The broadcast ends with a word from Otabil to the viewer again,

where he stresses the importance of the message for one's personal life, invites prayer and correspondence, and blesses the viewer.

Otabil is a charismatic speaker who knows how to entertain his audience. His sermons, addressed to the church audience and the media audience at once, are a skilful mix of inspirational teaching, Biblical preaching, social-political commentary, and entertainment. He makes ample use of story-telling techniques and inserts jokes and anecdotes to entertain his audience and at the same time teach a lesson or illustrate a point. Always dressed in a large, flowing African gown, his flamboyant presence adds visual spectacle to the sermon (fig. 1). Otabil does not stay behind the pulpit, but, like most charismatic preachers, uses the whole stage and his whole body to get his message across. Despite the large auditorium and the mass audience, Otabil skilfully creates a relaxed atmosphere of sharing, of having fun together, of intimacy almost. As a professional entertainer, Otabil places the right jokes at exactly the right moments and mass laughter is indeed not exceptional during sermons. This image is reconfirmed by the visual introduction to the *Living Word* broadcast, which shows a group of young men in church laughing out loud and slapping their thighs. This sets the tone for the two million people settling in front of their TV sets on Sunday evening: they are going to be inspired by the Word of God and they are going to have some entertainment too, and the one does not diminish the other.

The entertaining element is an important factor in the success of the *Living Word*, and indeed, of charismatic Pentecostalism worldwide. According to many of Otabil's fans, with whom I spoke in Accra, Otabil does not only make the Word of God palpable, he makes it fun too. But bringing the Word to the masses through entertaining media formats also comes with challenges. One of those is the question of how to bind people — to the church, to God, to the pastor — in a setting of mass distraction and diversion.[24] Through the media Otabil creates an audience far beyond the church membership. The circulation of his media products brings a religious public into being, congregating around the spectacular image of the media pastor and his teachings. Listeners and viewers of *Living Word* participate in this community by sharing in the church's message, writing letters or e-mails, ordering CDs, listening to messages online, or visiting or joining the church. This audience is part of a very fluid, heterogeneous,

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[24] Marleen de Witte, 'Modes of Binding, Moments of Bonding: Mediating Divine Touch in Ghanaian Pentecostalism and Traditionalism', in: B. Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, New York: Palgrave 2009, 183-205.
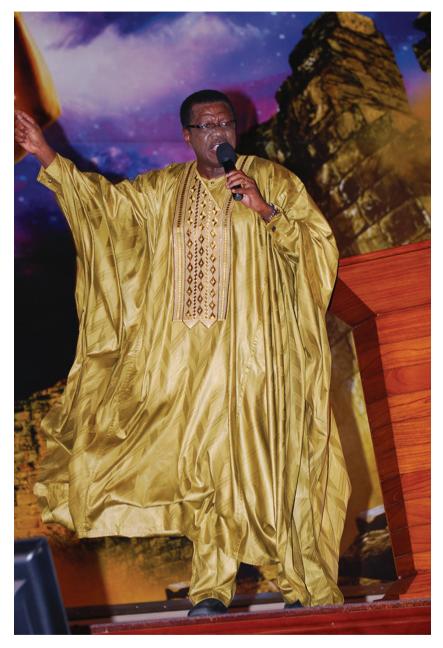
Figure 1: Pastor Mensa Otabil preaching in the Christ Temple, 2010. Photo courtesy ICGC.

unstable media public, with different degrees of commitment, identification, and interaction.

Addressing, and thereby constituting, a mass audience through television, that is, addressing them as viewers as part of a public, is very different from the congregational model of religious belonging that characterizes mainstream churches. In this context it may be useful to invoke the contrast between a church and a public described by Michael Warner.[25] Asking 'what is a public?', Warner mentions attention as one important precondition for a public to exist. A public exists by virtue of being addressed, it depends on the circulation and accessibility of media, and it must predicate some degree of attention from its members. Warner contrasts this to the old model of the church, where membership depends on categorical classification as church members, regardless of their actual activity. Hence, church membership is more or less stable. A public, by contrast, depends on its members' activity, namely, on their attention. A public is thus fundamentally unstable: it ceases to exist when people no longer pay attention. Of course, this contrast is no longer valid when churches make extensive use of media and church communities and media audiences flow into each other. But Warner's contrast does point to a challenge media churches face: because of the fundamental instability of the public, they constantly have to solicit attention. The public's attention has to be continuously renewed.

In the ICGC editing studio, I saw this concern reflected in the practices of the *Living Word* editors in an interesting way. Selecting audience cutaways to intersperse with the footage of Otabil, they used only shots of audience members who paid attention and cut out those who did not. Warner's statement that 'attention is the principle sorting category by which members and non-members are discriminated' thus found direct expression in the practice of editing.[26] These audience cutaways sustain Otabil's authority in the public realm, that depends to a large extend on the size and appearance of his following. At the same time they are meant as role models to be emulated and internalized by the television viewers. But while editing can create a public image of a crowd full of devote, attentive believers by leaving out individuals who are distracted, such forms of discrimination cannot be extended to the *Living Word* audience. Despite attempts at guiding the reception of the message by the church's audience correspondence department, the church is in no way able to

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[25] Michael Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics', *Public Culture* 14/1 (2002), 61.
[26] Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics', 61.

control, supervise, and guide the persons that make up this fluid and dispersed community. As the reception of the ICGC message lacks close supervision and physical interaction, it is very difficult to guide and assess the life-transforming religious experience it is hoped to prompt and that forms the core of born-again Christianity. The challenge posed by disseminating the *Living Word* to an ever wider, anonymous mass audience is how to sustain Christian belonging and commitment. Like editing the raw footage into perfect audience shots, turning media publics into committed Christians requires constant work, repetition, and renewal. The difference of course is that the latter process is inherently unstable and never final.

In an interview with me as well as in sermons Otabil expressed his concerns that the Pentecostal identity and message waters down, that being born-again becomes an outward style instead of an inner transformation that turns people to Christ. He criticises people's shallow identification with charismatic Christianity as a popular style — what he calls 'bumper sticker Christianity' — and their adherence to the charismatic personalities of pastors rather than to Christ. Yet at the same time this is exactly what Otabil and other media pastors stimulate by the ways in which they showcase their churches and their own persona in the mass mediated religious marketplace. Churches' loss of control over the manner in which religion becomes public and their concerns about religious authenticity as the boundaries between religion and entertainment increasingly break down are well illustrated by the following case.

TV 3's *The Pulpit*

TV 3 was the first private free-on-air television station in Ghana to begin commercial broadcasting in 1997. The TV channel together with the film production section, Gama Film, form the company Gama Media International, which resulted from the sale in 1996 of 70 % of the shares of the Ghana Film Industry Corporation by the Ghanaian government to a Malaysian TV production company. The remaining 30 % is Ghanaian owned. Extended to Kumasi in 2002, TV 3's transmissions cover most of Southern Ghana, from 5 in the morning till midnight. The station airs and produces a variety of television programmes including news bulletins, current affairs, documentaries, dramas, and reality television and entertainment shows. It is especially popular for its showing of Mexican *telenovelas*, Korean series, African movies, and music. As other TV stations in Ghana, TV 3 sells airtime per slots of half an hour for privately produced

programmes, including many Christian media ministries. Exploiting the business value of charismatic Pentecostalism,[27] TV 3 airs religious broadcasts four days a week at 5.30 am and at 6 pm, in the weekends also at 11.30 am and 6 am. Since 2001 TV 3 has proudly hosted Otabil's *Living Word* every Sunday evening at 6 pm. Over the 15 years of its operation, then, TV 3 has served and established a vast market for Christian programming.

In June 2011 TV 3 launched a new gospel reality show titled *The Pulpit*.[28] Designed as an eviction talent contest and broadcast live every Sunday evening at 8 pm, it features a competition between teenagers to preach the gospel of Christ and convince the public of their charismatic preaching talents. Based upon Proverbs 22:6, 'Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it', the idea of the show is 'to groom and prepare young aspiring preachers and prospective teachers of the gospel, giving them the platform to build confidence and also unearth their God given talents.'[29] The show has been hugely popular with the public, but has also caused much controversy. The main criticism has come from churches and concerned Christians who comment that the show rather grooms self-confident fake preachers who know the tricks of persuasion and thus teaches young people to be fraudsters.

The show explicitly seeks to propagate the Word of God. Through various media channels TV 3 proudly announced the new show as follows:

> TV 3 is about to achieve another feat in the reality show industry with an upcoming gospel reality show dubbed 'The Pulpit.' The Christian community and the general public at large will soon be exposed to a lot of inspiration, *the truth in the word*, and *the power in the gospel* when teenagers between the ages of 12 to 16 are given the opportunity to mount the pulpit on TV 3 to showcase their charisma through preaching the word of God and offering inspirational teachings (emphasis by the author).

Host of the show is Pastor Azigiza Junior, a musician, radio presenter, and disc jockey, who recently gave his life to Christ and became a youth leader at the End Time Power Ministries in Accra. Although he briefly withdrew from the entertainment scene, he returned to show business 'to do God's work in

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[27] De Witte, 'Business of the Spirit'.
[28] I am grateful to Anna-Riikka Kauppinen for drawing my attention to *The Pulpit*.
[29] Information about *The Pulpit* has mainly been taken from TV 3's official website, http://www.tv3.com.gh/thepulpit/index.asp.

Figure 2: Candidates and host on stage in *The Pulpit*, TV3, 2011. Source: www.tv3.com.gh/thepulpit/gallery.html.

the Gospel vein.'[30] He believes that Christianity has to be repackaged to suit modern times and sees himself primarily as an apostle to the youth. Apart from helping colleague gospel singers to record their music, presenting *The Pulpit* show was an excellent opportunity for him to pursue this aim.

Twelve contestants between 12 and 16, eight boys and four girls, took part in the competition. The significance of the age 12 has been adopted from the life of Jesus Christ, as he began preaching the gospel at that age. Except one contestant from the Methodist Church, all were from various charismatic-Pentecostal churches. Every week they received a new preaching assignment, ranging from 'faith', 'forgiveness,' and 'giving' to 'thanksgiving' and 'tithing'. A jury board, consisting of representatives of various Christian churches, commented upon and judged the performances. The idea was that in this way *The Pulpit* would not only offer a platform but also 'give children the chance to be

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[30] Website *Ghana-Link*, http://www.ghana-link.com/humaninterest.html, accessed 29 December 2011.

mentored by reputable men of God.' With 70 % vote, however, the public had a much greater say in judging the contestants and determining who was to be evicted and who passed. As in eviction talent shows worldwide, viewers voted for their favourite contestant via text message.

To 'add more colour and bliss to the show', choirs from various churches were invited to intersperse the children's sermons with 'powerful local songs and praises.' The shows were broadcast live from the TV 3 studio, where a fanciful set was created with light blue neon crosses, a large image of Jesus, and a glass pulpit (fig. 2).

The grand finale, however, was held at a branch of the International Central Gospel Church in Sakumono, Accra. The final show on Sunday 7 August 2011 attracted a large audience, including many celebrity preachers, dignitaries such as the Accra Mayor, and representatives of the show's sponsors. According to the official programme website, 'the auditorium was soaked with the Holy Ghost as various choirs came one after the other to warm the stage with some inspiring and spirit filled songs. Fans, relatives as well as loved ones danced all their hearts out.' After the four remaining contestants preached on the respective topics of 'persistent prayer,' 'whatever a man sows, he will reap', 'the key to greatness is humble service' and 'prayer', 14-year-old Abigail Tetteh emerged as the winner. She was awarded 5,000 Ghanaian cedis (GHC), a laptop, and a full scholarship up to tertiary education level sponsored by a pharmacy. At the occasion of the presentation ceremony the brands manager at TV 3 stated that *The Pulpit* would return bigger and better next year. Rev. Sam Korankye Ankrah of Royal House Chapel International, one of the big names of the charismatic celebrity scene, promised to award a scholarship for the second, third and fourth winners. He said he was delighted to see these kids take up the mantle of spreading the Word of God in the country. He therefore commended TV 3 for the show and the contestants for their skills and energy displayed.

The show also evoked heavy criticisms, however. One example is an article titled '*TV3 Pulpit Show: Is Preaching an Art or a Calling?*', distributed via various websites. The author, a Christian and a journalist, voices his doubts about the show.

> As a patron of the many reality shows on TV, and mostly on TV 3, one of Ghana's growing television stations, I am extremely disturbed about the network's latest reality show dubbed "The Pulpit". [. . .] Is preaching supposed to be a talent, an art or a calling? Should one's ability to present the Word of God fluently qualify him to be a preacher? [. . .] If the art of oratory is a prerequisite for preaching the Gospel, then perhaps, the likes of Malcolm X, would have been the greatest preachers, perhaps better than Jesus

Christ. On what basis are the true preachers going to be picked from among these kids between ages 12-16? [...] Destined preachers of the Gospel of Christ, always become aware of their calling through many divine means such as dreams and prophecies. They do not need competitions to uncover them because these things are spiritual and not physical. I therefore think that "The Pulpit" cannot be an acceptable and credible platform to unearth preachers of the Gospel. [...] It is so obvious that the love for money and anything business-related has misled people into misguided ventures such as this "Pulpit Show". I would like to call on discerning Christians and bold Ministers of the Gospel who uphold the truth in the unadulterated Word of God, to condemn this programme just as they speak out against devious politicians. No wonder today, many charlatans have invaded the Church proclaiming to be Men of God, raping, defrauding and abusing women.[31]

Such critiques must be understood in the context of a broader religious field in Ghana, hinted at in the last sentence, where the 'fake pastor' or 'false prophet' is a recurrent figure and charismatic pastors always risk being accused of faking supernatural powers and just performing the tricks to mislead the people with false claims only in order to get rich quickly and to lead extravagant or immoral lifestyles. No pastor is totally immune to such criticisms and the legitimacy of particular pastors' claims to anointing is much debated in charismatic-Pentecostal circles and beyond. Even established pastors such as Mensa Otabil constantly need to authenticate the implicit message that they are not mere media creations, but rather embody real and effective anointing from God.

In his critique, the writer problematizes the 'art of oratory' as a prerequisite for preaching the gospel, which he says is a divine calling. 'These things are spiritual and not physical.' Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that much of the persuasive power of preachers derives from mastering skills and styles that are not limited to the domain of religion, but are shared with political orators — 'Malcolm X' — or, we may add, entertainers. A tension thus exists, between on the one hand the power of performance ('physical,' 'art') and, on the other hand, an understanding of preaching as a divine calling ('spiritual'). This tension is implicated in struggles for and over religious authority and evokes the question how to discern 'true preachers' from 'charlatans.' This question is left unanswered by the author. Although he states that 'destined preachers of the Gospel of Christ become aware of their calling through divine means such as dreams and prophecies,' the means of discernment available to the public are

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[31] Website *Peace FM Online*, http://news.peacefmonline.com/features/201106/46721.php, accessed 29 December 2011.

far from clear-cut and this is exactly the source of people's fear of the figure of the fake pastor.

Such concerns with discerning fake and real spiritual power are of course characteristic of a type of religion that locates religious authority not in institutionalized hierarchies and formal education, but in divine inspiration and charisma. The new accessibility of broadcast media and the mass mediation of religion, however, have accelerated fears about spiritual trickery and generated a public obsession with assessing genuine spiritual power and unmasking fakery.[32] Time and again, one hears about the activities of fake pastors trying to capitalize on the widespread craving for miracles and making huge sums of money from unsuspecting individuals, who call on them for spiritual solutions to their problems. A popular talk show host in Kumasi, Kwabena Asare, aka 'Otsunoko', has made it his mission to expose fake pastors live on air on his radio program, which is aired on Nhyira FM on weekdays from 7 pm to 10 pm.[33] As a result of their eager exploitation of the power of media technologies to enchant the masses, charismatic pastors have become particularly susceptible to suspicions of fakery and the fake pastor has come to be associated with charismatic Christianity more than with any other religion.

Conclusion

Christianity in Ghana has become a marketplace that is for a large part constituted by mass media. In this context, boundaries between religion and entertainment have become increasingly unstable. With the globalisation and commercialisation of the media, the popular formats of the public sphere have come to evolve around celebrity, show, and spectacle. Charismatic Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on emotional expression, ecstatic experience, and charismatic leadership, appears to link up easily with these formats. As a result, charismatic-Pentecostal discourses and styles of worship and expression increasing influence not only the wider religious landscape, but extend beyond

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[32] Marleen de Witte, 'The Electric Touch Machine Miracle Scam: Body, Technology, and the (Dis)authentication of the Pentecostal Supernatural', in: J. Stolow (ed.), *Deus in Machina*: *Religion, Technology, and the Space in Between*, New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming Autumn 2012; see also Jesse W. Shipley, 'Comedians, Pastors, and the Miraculous Agency of Charisma in Ghana', *Cultural Anthropology* 24/3 (2009), 523-552.

[33] In Nigeria, the authenticity of media pastors became such a matter of public concern that in May 2004 the Nigerian National Broadcasting Commission imposed a ban on the depiction of 'unverified miracles' on its television stations.

institutionalised religion into popular culture, where religious media celebrities and religious entertainment flourish. This culminated most recently in a preaching talent show on one of the commercial TV channels.

Much of charismatic Pentecostalism's success in terms of attracting followers can be attributed to its easy incorporation of popular cultural forms and media technologies and its effective exploitation of the power of aesthetic style. But, as we have seen in the two cases discussed, this also brings with it certain challenges and concerns, in particular with regard to the authenticity of claims to religious authority and religious being. Concerns over authenticity play out in two directions. First, from the pastors' point of view, mass media offer religious leaders new opportunities for reaching and attracting new audiences, but they also pose challenges with regard to binding them as Christians. The eagerness with which religious leaders employ mass media to reach out goes together with a new anxiety about not binding people. Media pastors like Mensa Otabil fear that the televisualisation and popularisation of the gospel merely attracts people to an 'outward religious style' without instigating the deep, life-transforming experience that the spiritual rebirth is supposed to be. At stake here is an insecurity over the new modes of religious attachment that come with reaching new audiences through the airwaves. The question for media pastors is: are they (becoming) true Christians? And how can we know?

Second, authenticity is also a concern from the audience's point of view. Mass media offer people new opportunities to engage with and follow a large number of pastors outside their own churches. At the same time, pastors' eager and skilful use of media technologies to persuade people of their powers and seduce them into their churches causes anxieties about pastors' true motives and divine mandate. At stake here is an insecurity over the sources of religious authority as religious leaders increasingly draw on formats and frames of entertainment media to capture broad audiences through the visceral power of visuals, voice, rhythm, and volume. Modern technologies, spectacular imagery and dramatic sounds have become novel markers of religious authority and authenticity. The attraction of followers to the new and often self-proclaimed men of God depends to a large extent on media and marketing strategies and personality creation. People's awareness of the increasing mingling of religion and business, however, gives rise to insecurities and contestations over the authenticity of claims to spiritual authority. The question for religious publics is: are they true men of God? And how can we know?

The affinity between charismatic Pentecostalism and media entertainment, and the success of their joint venture, lies in that both thrive not so much on persuasion through rational-critical argument, but through embodied

performance, impressive imagery and stirring sound, that is, through affect, emotion and charisma. What the two examples of the television ministry and the gospel reality show bring out, however, is that there is both power and peril in Pentecostalism's employment of popular media and entertainment styles. The persuasive power of aesthetic style can enhance spiritual authority as well as fears of spiritual emptiness. Pastors' media strategies therefore require a careful balancing act between these two conflicting impulses.

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