

# The Commodification of Religion: A Rhetorical Analysis of Charismatic Programmes in Kenya

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## Abstract

This paper discusses dominant human afflictions that variously become exigencies for a rhetorical situation in commodifying the spiritual experience by televangelists in Kenya. The commodification of religion is a rarity in contemporary media and communication research in Africa. It can, however, be explored in the context of 'mediated spirituality', by acknowledging the place of communication technologies such as Television, in the mediation of religious content. This interplay between media and religion has arguably availed opportunities through which religion is commodified by converting some aspects of religion into spiritual commodities through a near capitalistic exchange. The study utilized Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory, which is a plausible instrument for examining a communicator's motive in structuring audience perception to influence behaviour aimed at eliciting certain desired responses. The paper argues that charismatic Televangelists use common spiritual, physical and economic afflictive conditions notably; disease, poverty and demonic oppression, to commodify religion through creative message construction to trigger a reciprocate process of material exchange for the spiritual benefit obtained. The paper submits that these charismatic programme creators are not only concerned with edification and spiritual nourishment of their audiences but are substantially motivated by the inherent exchange value of religion through which human afflictions are rhetorically appropriated to provoke reciprocity for the spiritual benefit obtained.

**Key Terms:** Commodification, Afflictions, Charismatic, Televangelism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between media and religion has increasingly evolved into an important site for academic research in recent years as media technologies continue to pervade virtually every social institution in contemporary society. Research has shown that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religions are largely shaped by their interaction with the mass media in very profound ways [1]; to the extent that most religious functions are performed in and through the media in conformity to Meyrowitz media metaphors on mediatisation of society [2].

This interplay between media and religion has however provided opportunities through which some elements of religion that were conventionally acknowledged for their social value are now commodified as 'mediated spirituality' through a capitalistic exchange of the spiritual service and experiences; to accomplish incidental material benefit for individual preachers. The place of human afflictions

in the commodification of religion is a scarcely explored area. This paper thus seeks to provide insights into how these aspects of human wellbeing are implicitly and sometimes explicitly appropriated for capitalistic exchange through televangelism.

Televangelism is a concept derived from "television" and "evangelism" with reference to the phenomenon of a conventional breed of Christian evangelists who use the medium of television to preach the gospel to the masses [3]. It is rooted in the Pentecostal movement in which preachers who advocate for 'charismatic theology' preach the gospel by affirming the power of faith in God through the demonstration of gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In Kenya, as is the case in most developed countries, Television is a popular medium of evangelism in which televangelists vigorously occupy airwaves in a bid to reach broad audiences with the gospel message. The growth of televangelism is premised in the preachers' recognition of the

television's ability to surmount both cultural and geographical barriers in spreading the "Good News [21]". Through a telecast, a typical preacher connects to a wide and narrow audience simultaneously, with the same airtime slot; effectively eliminating both temporal and spatial constraints with ease. Consequently, the need to stage crusades in every other town continues to diminish due to this mass media capability.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is a culmination of qualitative data analysis as part of an explanatory/interpretive study. Purposive sampling was used for data collection by applying given parameters of interest to arrive at the sample frame, with TV programmes as the target population. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method in which the subjects selected are judged as being representative of the population in the market. This technique provides for selection of units that bear the set-out attributes only, and thus saves time for unnecessary volumes of data [4]. It has low chances of external validity, but for the said study, maximum variation from among three different channels was deemed to have adequately accounted for validity and objectivity of data. The researcher derived sample by recording episodes of different Televangelists hosted by the following local TV channels; KBC, KTN, and AVIATION TV, which satisfied regular religious broadcast schedule on a weekly basis, that is to say; at a specific time and day of the week, a given charismatic programme was routinely transmitted on the identified channel of interest.

A total of six charismatic programmes were recorded on tape while on transmission from the identified channels. Data was then transcribed and coded into excerpts comprising verbal and visual representations and analyzed. The author then picked a sample unit and examined the use of words, phrases and images to derive themes around a dominant concept. Using the Pentadic elements, he characterized the dominant term and then determined how such is used by the rhetor to advance a single idea in a given excerpt to precipitate commodification of the spiritual experience and service.

## Literature Review

### Conceptualizing religious commodification

Marx defines a commodity as something that organizes both material-like and social relations in a capitalistic society. He further describes a commodity as the basic unit of social relations in capitalism [5] that is used for value exchange. These definitions encompass religion as a social institution considering that religious practices operate on the premise of social relations with religious commodities forming important ingredients which propel that social process.

Einstein [6] identifies commodification of religion in *faith branding*, as a concept reflected in the packaging of religion as a product for purchase mainly using sacred objects and religious artefacts. Einstein equally situates televangelists as a representation of faith brands; religious products and services that are part of a cohesive marketing plan to create products that resonate with today's consumer-conscious religious shopper.

In essence, the media of communication as a market force has significantly availed viable platforms for the expression of religious ideas and validation of religion as an important social institution in contemporary society. Conversely, some of those avenues are potential platforms for preachers to subtly exploit audiences in making the 'spiritual experience' appear as a product for sale. Lately, music videos, live performances and previously audiotaped messages have shaped the material culture of the religious consumer. Gospel music videos and audio have a significant share of airtime on the airwaves in many media stations targeting a substantial audience base that resonates with Christian religious themes. The transmission of these programmes results in huge revenues for media stations and loyalties for individual content creators.

This commodity character of religion is located within a capitalistic context of media production, which in our case is the media infrastructure and particularly television. Thomas [7] posits:

Neo-Pentecostal theologies validate the seamless flow of media and non-media products between the pulpit, the home and the market, thus contributing to the strengthening of the local-global Christian economy [7].

As such, the way a 'spiritual experience' is commodified at mediation is worth the attention of media and religion scholars today, and televangelism is one such avenue of commodification in the present media-saturated environment. This paper locates dominant human afflictions as ingredients of religious commodification through the rhetorical prowess of some leading televangelists in Kenya.

### The Character of Televangelism in Kenya

After mapping the religious broadcast landscape in Kenya, it is evident that Televangelism is characterized by the presence of influential charismatic preachers who often propagate unconventional theological ideas such as miraculous healing and seed sowing practices. For many pastors, this is a lucrative enterprise in which one is predisposed to huge proceeds of money to fund both their own personal and ministerial needs. This trend has however prompted concerns with the general public and government alike, in that preachers are perceived to be exploiting the

commitment of their followers by enriching themselves using unethical practices through media platforms like television [8].

The electronic church has evidently gained ground in Kenya as many churches have their presence on Web Pages in addition to mounting televised sermons. The exponents of charismatic theology, i.e. the belief in the manifestation of spiritual gifts; such as Deliverance church's Bishop Mark Kariuki, Pius Muiru of 'Maximum Miracle Center' and Wilfred Lai of Mombasa among others, have settled on television as an effective evangelistic tool to reach wide audiences across the country. Their respective programmes aired mainly on KBC and other religious channels including SAYARE TV and GBS are a common feature on Kenya religious media landscape. This scenario has been accentuated by the digital broadcast protocol that effectively expanded the media broadcast regime, warranting for a variety of religious programming in the country, through the opening of new faith-based channels.

Scholars have attributed the success of televangelism to the fact that televangelists appeal to the viewers' worst fears about the world, which aid in creating a worldview that is full of anxiety, fear and distrust. This perspective is imbued with a message framing philosophy advanced by the televangelists; where financial contribution is attached to the provision of information and encouragement that is necessary to cope with the world perceived as evil, threatening and immoral [9]. This view by Armstrong seems highly characteristic of most televangelists who operate on Kenyan TV channels today, with financial appeals and miracles forming the most definitive features of their sermons.

Charismatic theology is viewed as integral to commodifying religion usually because of its attribute of manifestation of supernatural power: the premise upon which human afflictions are addressed. Charismatic preachers are particularly keen on appropriating the giftings of the Holy Spirit to alleviate various afflictive human conditions through prayers, deliverance and prophecy. These giftings come in handy in relieving believers of depressive conditions such as diverse disease and poverty, an asset that is arguably not much embraced by the non-charismatic preachers.

### Theoretical Context

The study employed Kenneth Burke's rhetorical framework to analyze both the linguistic and visual elements used in televangelism; to establish the occurrence of commodification by use of rhetorical

devices in the programmes. Using Kenneth Burke's principle of the dramatistic Pentad, the visual and verbal representations were analyzed concurrently to establish how they are utilized to achieve persuasion. The model proved useful in examining what rhetorical strategies are deployed in religious expressions such as preaching, prayer and prophecy; the dominant features of televangelism, in structuring audience perceptions. Burke [10] introduced the dramatistic pentad as a tool for analyzing how speakers persuade audience members to accept their view of reality [11], and thus influence their behaviour.

The Dramatistic pentad is a set of basic terms identified by Kenneth Burke through which people, most commonly discuss human motives and actions [12]. The pentad comprises of five elements of human drama namely the -act, scene, agent, agency and purpose [10]. The *Act* refers to what was done; *Scene* refers to the context of the act, setting or background; *Agent* refers to who performed the act; *Agency* refers to the means through which the act is performed and *Purpose*- the speaker's stated or implied goal of the act.

In Burke's view, the establishment of the motive of communication could be obtained by a "ratio analysis"; a paring of the Pentadic elements [13] to evaluate the privileged term. To perform the analysis, the author identified the terms or concepts that represent the five elements in the programme (text) and then paired two different elements in order to examine their mutual influence and determine how the communicator privileges one aspect of the message over the other to achieve a persuasion or a rhetorical objective.

### Findings and data analysis

Human afflictions are captured in this discussion as conditions of need present among audiences that form exigencies for the rhetorical situation. The afflictions most used by preachers to interact with audiences in the programmes were identified through inductive data analysis by selectively coding text into units of meaning [14]; to derive dominant concepts from the verbal and visual representations captured from the programmes. The author coded for statements and phrases along with frozen video clips that represented a spiritual and or physical condition seen to define the theme of the message. Afflictions are here equated with conceptual terms found in the excerpts that are definitive of a spiritual condition, economic condition, social or cultural need such as poverty, and whose resolution calls for appropriation of spiritual gifts (charismatic) through prayers and prophecy by the televangelist.

**Table-1: Identified afflictions per programme**

Programme	Affliction	Channel
Kuna Nuru Gizani	Fear of Death	<b>KBC</b>
Jesus Teaching Ministry	Demonic oppression	<b>AVIATION TV</b>
The Word will set you free	Disease	<b>KBC</b>
Neno Evangelism	Poverty	<b>KBC</b>


**Poverty**

According to Pradip Thomas in Servaes [7], poverty is a lack of resources which people need to develop themselves. Absence of these resources namely: money, food, proper housing and clothing, represent depressive social and economic conditions for those affected. Poverty is a major subject in themes for mediated charismatic sermons in Kenya, with many preachers promising remedy for the problem by invoking religious rituals, such as prayers and prophecy. Under this section, the author analyzed for the existence of the concept in the excerpt, where the rhetor privileges the subject as a defining ingredient for his message.

In Excerpt 1 below, the rhetor identifies a God-given promise from the Bible text directed to those

in needs, and who may experience material shortage. He goes ahead in his exposition to suggest that the way to be free from lack and get blessed is to give alms to the needy as well. This indirectly challenges the person experiencing lack, to possibly *Act* by way of giving, in order to get blessed. The rhetor emphasizes poverty as a possible affliction that may have resulted from demonic oppression and how God is able to deliver the oppressed and make them rich by giving them money. The idea is reinforced visually when the rhetor is seen giving cash to a lady whom he has just conducted deliverance of demonic oppression that supposedly, was the cause of her poverty. *Poverty* thus forms an affliction that is ostensibly cured by appropriating the spiritual gift of prophecy and deliverance, involving money exchange thereby commodifying the experience.

**Excerpt 1 Bishop Maina Ng’ang’a, KBC; Saturday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

Theme	Affliction	Verbal representation	Visual representation
Getting your blessing	Demonic oppression Poverty	Isaiah 58:10-11, “if you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon.....”.once you give to the needy that’s when God begins to bless you. Lady, “I have experienced many problems after my husband divorced me. I have suffered poverty and humiliation; have left only Ksh.3500 in the house” Pastor, “ I destroy every witchcraft power in your life in Jesus name”	 <p>The rhetor gives money to a needy congregant who has been delivered of demonic oppression. “Go do some business with this money”.</p>

(The Gospel will set you free –KBC)

**Diseases**

Disease is a dominant concept in televangelism used as a possible exigency for rhetorical situation in commodifying religion. According to medical sociology, disease is an adverse physical state consisting of physiological dysfunction within an individual [15]. World Health Organization defines disease as an abnormal pathological state that affects parts of an individual. Diseases frequently cause suffering and unleash search for meanings of the afflictive experience. Religion thus provides relief and opportunity to ameliorate the effects of such experiences through religious rituals like prayers and prophecy, as evidenced in charismatic programmes.

Using excerpt 2 below, the author analyzed programmes for the existence of the concept of diseases, which the rhetor (preacher) appropriates in the programme as an exigency for message construction to commodify religion by way of advancing possible remedies for diverse diseases.


Excerpt 2 below depicts the testimony of a mother with a sick child who supposedly got healed through the prayers of the rhetor during a previous deliverance service. She thus narrates her experience to a live church audience. The testimony represents the evidence of the rhetor’s ability to administer healing and the effectiveness of the anointing oil to appropriate the healing. In this excerpt thus, *Disease* defines the



main ingredient for message construction in the programme and forms the affliction that connects the rhetor with his audiences in commodifying the spiritual

experience, by way of promising cure for identified diseases in similar scenarios.

**Excerpt 2 Apostle Peter Manyuru, AVIATION TV; Sunday, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

Theme	Affliction	Verbal representation	Visual representation
God is a healer	Disease	My name is XY from place D. The problem with this child has been that after sleeping in the night, he wakes up in the morning with burns all over his body. When the apostle prayed for him, and I applied the anointing oil, the child got well, and now he is completely healed.	 <p>Mother of the healed child testifies as she holds the baby.</p>

(Jesus Healing Ministries –AVIATION TV)



**Fear of Death**

The "Fear of death" forms a major subject in charismatic TV programmes as derived from Bible text in Romans 6:23; "the wages of sin is death", and thus represents a powerful exigency for rhetorical situation by which most televangelists craft their message themes. The author analyzed the excerpt for the existence of death, where the concept constitutes the reason for message construction by the preacher.

In Excerpt 3 below, the rhetor exegetes Luke 7:15 (Bible text) to construct his theme on the 'Fear of

death' as an affliction. From the said account, he presupposes an audience afflicted with the fear of death, by analogising the events in the scripture with real-life experiences. The visual depiction of the word 'death' and the accident scene, reinforces the possibility of death happening to a potential viewer. The fear of death thus emerges in the excerpt as a major concept influencing message construction by the rhetor and exigency for rhetorical situation to commodify the spiritual experience; by way of advancing a possible resolution for the affliction.

**Excerpt 3 Pastor Pius Muiru –KBC; Sunday, November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

Theme	Affliction	Verbal representation	Visual representation
I will not die	Fear of Death	I want us to look at the Bible in Luke chapter 7 verse 15, "And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak and Jesus delivered him to his mother". The spirit of death had invaded that family but Jesus broke it. Who among you has the spirit of death began to reign? God has sent me to pray with you and declare that the power of death cannot rule over you. People are getting their lives terminated through road accidents haphazardly.	 <p>The word death eclipsed against sky blue colour depicts an idea of the unknown</p>  <p>Accident scene representing the agency of death.</p>

(There is Light in the Darkness –KBC)

**Human afflictions as ingredients of religious commodification**

Themes and concepts emergent from the above analytical process suggest that televangelists in charismatic programmes use common social-cultural and economic conditions affecting people to connect

with viewers' daily experiences strategically. These conditions as advanced by Armstrong [9] are the exigencies for the rhetorical situation which facilitates audience/preacher interaction for the commodification of the spiritual service and experience. Upon location of afflictive conditions such as sickness, poverty and

demonic oppression, charismatic preachers find the bases for providing the much-needed information and encouragement to the audience. Although propagation of the gospel is fronted as the overt purpose for the programmes, Bible texts are a major source of analogies which implicitly inspire audiences into engaging with the preacher by presenting experiential parity between Bible characters and the target audiences; thus deriving largely uncontested credibility for the preacher. Social problems such as poverty and sicknesses constitute scenes that demand pastoral and spiritual interventions and hence, a currency for value exchange in commodifying religion.

This paper observes, for charismatic TV programmes, dominant human afflictions in the Kenyan society present rhetorical situations for Televangelists to develop content for TV mediation. The set of afflictions used by the Televangelist are variously human conditions of inconvenience found in ordinary social-cultural settings and therefore plausible for audience appeal when it comes to seeking relief. Chukwuma and Uhembe [16] locate a conscious effort in televangelism to rule the airwaves in a deliberate attempt to create a window display for various spiritual products. This fairly reflects a market-like entrepreneurial undertaking that is characteristic of Televangelism in Kenya.

For most charismatic programmes on Kenyan Television, different diseases, poverty, demonic oppression and diverse life-threatening scenarios form major concepts upon which Televangelists define the exigencies for extra mundane interventions on the afflicted audience members. The interventions are exclusively the province of the televangelist by means of exercising his/her spiritual authority through spiritual gifts such as prophecy and exorcism. The afflictions are a function of the rhetorical strategies used by the preacher, and their remedy constitutes an implicit reciprocate process of material exchange between the preacher and the recipient, for the spiritual service and benefit extended.

Galgalo [17] observes that there is a tendency to package the name of God and sell it to the highest bidder in exchange for miracles and blessings, contrary to religious orthodoxy which offends commercialization of spiritual gifts. Most televangelists in Kenya use a range of visual and linguistic devices to craft messages that project a preferred view of how to deal with the identified affliction. More often than not, that view seeks to incite material substance behaviour in the form of offerings to implicitly represent a reciprocation of the spiritual benefit conferred.

These observations reinforce Armstrong's view that modern televangelism has reshaped the religious marketplace by skillfully packaging solutions that appeal to a wide range of social and economic

problems which affect people including complex human conditions of anxiety like diseases and lack of means [9]. The current study demonstrated how a range of afflictive human conditions become monetized in the process of mediating religious content in contrast to conventional religious orthodoxy.

### **The Mass media ecological influences on the commodification of religion**

A critical observation of Faith-based programming on Kenyan TV channels reveals that Christian programmes transcend to commercial stations largely during weekends, as opposed to the faith channels where weekly programming is dominated by Christian based programmes. There are full-time faith-based channels that include Family TV, SAYARE, MBCI, Hope TV and Aviation TV among others, who dedicate space to Christian gospel teachings, religious films, gospel music and prime time news bulletins.

This array of TV channels available for mediation of religious content is a fair representation of a vibrant mass media ecology in which diverse religious ideas, including Charismatics, thrive. However, message themes are key in the crafting of programmes that can appeal to both the audience and the media channel of residence. For Charismatics, human afflictions form the exigency for rhetorical situations; thus, warranting the production of a TV programme in Kenya.

Television mediation in Kenya has grown exponentially, with 17 channels in 2013 to 220 by 2015 [18]. The highest reap in growth was registered in 2014 with the advent of digital broadcast protocol, which witnessed an influx of community and Faith-based channels taking advantage of the migration in facilitating propagation of the gospel; examples include MBCI by the 'Kingdom Seekers Fellowship' in Nakuru and Hope TV for 'Christ is the Answer Ministries'. Radio and Television are the most preferred media against total population; with radio taking a share of 64% as opposed to TV with 30% of the total population that watch Television [18].

The way human afflictions blend with mass media techniques in an attempt to achieve the rhetorical aim of charismatic programmes, reveals how the televisual codes of communication advance a preferred view of a situation through meaning-making, and in obtaining desired responses from both live and the virtual audiences for the content creator. The mass media ecology, McLuhan perspective, advances the view that media environments comprising of technology, techniques and modes of communication can influence human perceptions and understanding of their symbolic environment in very profound ways [19]. Evidently, the choice of TV by Televangelists to conduct business by appropriating the afflictions attests

to this theory as mass media driven constructions of reality are influenced by the biases of the medium used.

The author observes that, with the choice of TV as a preferred medium for religious mediation, televangelists effectively appropriate their visual/linguistic techniques to obtain desired results from the afflicted viewers, without the audiences necessarily making a decision to subscribe to the church or the faith in question. Indeed premised upon Gerbner's cultural indicators perspective, the exposure to these programmes has the effect of introducing a new cultural reality to the viewer as pertains to the faith preached [20]. Thus, based on that interaction, the Tele-church inadvertently acquires more members who translate into both numerical and material strength for the movement as reflected in the preacher's intent in taking advantage of such a following, through the display of telephone contacts for counselling purposes and bank accounts for channelling offerings.

In commodifying the audience, Televangelists aid the media institutions in constructing an audience that can as well be useful to the market in terms of viewership and advertisements. The home audience is incidentally exposed to the experiences of a televised church, which serves as an inspiration to covet similar experiences. In essence, the televised audience is indirectly objectified, commodified and sold to the home audiences through media stations' airing fee and material substance responses directed to the preacher. The Live audience with whom the preacher engages directly is ideally useful to the viewer in authenticating the services offered, particularly those to do with deliverance and healing of diseases. Such live audiences thus, rhetorically translate into a commodity that is sold to the home audience by depicting activities on the church floor such as miracles and testimonies.

This paper observes that mediation of those experiences has the potential of motivating the virtual home audience to engage with the preacher for remedy of their possible afflictions; Thus, as the church in Kenya executes its functions through the media, these mass media dynamics will undoubtedly continue to shape the way religion is commodified as mediated spirituality, through Television and other media.

To a large extent, the activities of charismatic Televangelists serve at building the personalities of preachers and establishing trust and credibility that disparately becomes avenues for manipulation of audiences, with the afflictions as the currency for the interaction. Mass media platforms and the choice of Television in particular for charismatic mediation, easily incorporate home audiences into a church service, engaging them through mobile contacts and bank accounts for purposes of prayers and giving. This potentially triggers material exchange between the

preacher and the home viewer, thus precipitating commodification.

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in this discussion, it is plausible to conclude that the production and mediation of religious content can implicitly be motivated by the commercial imperatives of individual actors like the televangelists. The use of media technology to advance religious ideas has proven to be a profitable option for televangelists and the Broadcasters alike; who use live audiences to instil a preferred view of reality articulated in the mediated programmes. This paper submits that such live audiences can become a currency for exchange by having their televised experiences used to influence a heterogeneous audience, by way of closing perceptual division and becoming part of the programme from wherever they may be [12]. In this regard, it is actually the use of mass media avenues like Television that facilitates the exchange of religious ideas, and thus, the commodification of those services implicitly takes place in the process.

Mediated spirituality is a modern day phenomenon in which mass media systems are effectively utilized by religious producers to reach audiences and engage them in diverse ways at a personal level without any form of scrutiny by known religious conventions. In the foregoing, the need to attend a live Church service has continued to diminish, and this has promoted personal religiosities that are aided by the media. This invasion of private space to mediate spiritual content has, as demonstrated by the current discussion, also created possibilities for exploitation of audiences by some unfettered and unscrupulous Preachers within the Christian fraternity [17]. As such, the media cannot be remotely alienated from the whole question of religious commodification in Kenya, when it comes to the concept of mediated spirituality by charismatic preachers.

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