THE REMEDIATION OF RELIGION IN A VISUAL CULTURE: UNDERSTANDING THE INTERACTION OF MEDIA, NEW RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

This paper assumes a paradoxical stance with regards to religion and the place of religion in modern society. While some scholars from Charles Taylor in his *secular age* to Pope Benedict XVI suggest the growing secularization of the pillars of society, others from Derrida to Meyer argue for the resurgence of religion. This paper while taking a middle stand argues rather for a change in the modality of experience of religion in modern society. As such, the new onus of argumentation is not about the decrease or increase of the belief culture but the changing ground of its experience and remediation by the new and prevailing media. The paper postulates that in the ambience of an ever-increasing visual culture, religion's representations assume the language of the visual culture therefore creating a fecund ground for the promotion of the very spectacular aspects of religious practices and silencing through minimal reportage of aspects of religion that do not flow with the visual logic. In the same line of thought, the paper postulates and predicts that representations of religion within the ambience of evolving visual culture in the ambit of the predominance of visual media may follow the logic, language and profit of show-business globally.

Introduction

Sociological projections on the trajectory of religion in modern society have assumed a dual albeit contrary stance: the *requiem* and the *resurrectio*. Manifold scholars from diverse fields of learning, prophetic progenies of Compte, informed by a certain analysis of the data and process of culture have predicted the ineluctable requiem of religion: defined in the effacement of religion from the public space and the relegation of religion as a guide in the private fora.

To this effect, the emergence of the public space in Habermas is relative to the decline of religion, which becomes nothing more than just one among the many opinions in the public space subject to the rule of rational discourse. (Habermas 4) In his *Secular Age,* Charles Taylor defined the requiem of religion in a three strand

secularity. In secularity one, the public space is defined as been emptied of God. Secularity two consists of "falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God and no longer going to church." Most incisive is secularity three, articulated in the changed 'conditions of believing' summed in a cultural propensity where the belief in God is "no longer axiomatic..." or "conditions of experience" that no longer necessarily encourage a default option for a theistic response to the human question (Taylor, 1-22).

For the theologians, the anticipated crisis of religion is articulated in religious indifference, atheism and religious apathy. John Sobrino and Felix Wilfred described this crisis of religion with reference to Christianity in the form of indifference, apathy and outright disenchantment with Christianity. (Sobrino and Wilfred 2005) While defining the contingent dignity of man relative to his communion with God, *Gaudium et Spes* delineates the crisis of the church in atheism. According to the document, "many of our contemporaries have never recognized this intimate and vital link with God, or have explicitly rejected it." Thus atheism must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age. (*Gaudium et Spes* No. 19)

The Crisis

The religious crisis manifests not just as a question of a particular religious body but of a crisis of God. People no longer believe in God. However, other branches of contemporary research manned equally by veritable scholars are singing the vibrant tones of a "resurrectio" of religion. (Derrida, 2006, Greeley, 1972, Castells, 1996) Derrida recognizes the "return or resurgence of religion" not in terms of a religion that did disappear but as a *re-apparition* of one that has been repressed by multifarious forces in the society. Meyer emphatically concludes, "clearly, it is inadequate to dismiss the public presence of religion". (Meyer, 6) "The marked articulation of religion in the public realm destabilizes the narrative of modernity as defined by the decline of the public role of religion". (Meyer, 6)

While attributing such dismissal of religion in public space more as a manifestation of the scholars' ideological bias, Meyer does disagree equally with the ascription of the resurgence of religion as a fundamentalist reaction to an unattainable modernization as it is in Manuel Castells[1] and the definition of the resurgence as a return of the repressed in Derrida." (Meyer, 2006) For Derida, "There is, because of the repression" of religion due to diverse forces in society, "an accumulation of force, a heightening of potential, an explosion of conviction, an overflowing of extraordinary power." (Derida, qtd in De Vries & Weber, 673)

Recognizing the salience of Meyer's 'ideological bias', this paper opines that most of the analyses decrying the decrease of religion thus suffer from the problem of limited horizon of analysis or of concern circumscribed by 'ecclessiocentrism' of particular religious bodies. In this regard, the analysis of the state of the religious tempo is delimited by the fervour of religious attitude in a particular religious institution like the Catholic Church and subsequently ascribed and generalized of all religious life in the world. Or of 'traditio-centrism'- where the rhythm of the religious atmosphere and its tempo are measured in resemblance to, in resonance with, in deviation from, or in continuation of a particular and past religious manifestation to the detriment of new nuances of a dynamic belief-culture in an ever changing world.

The religious scenario of Africa and Nigeria, in particular, apparently adheres closer to the flourishing of religion than its effacement both in the private and public fora. As an American journalist and Vatican observer noted of one of the numerous religions in Nigeria,

> In the 20th century, Africa went from a Catholic population of 1.9 million in 1900 to 130 million in 2000, a staggering growth rate of 6,708 percent. Half of all adult baptisms in the world, the surest sign of missionary expansion, are in Africa. Inexorably, pastoral and intellectual energy in the church will follow population, and this means that African leaders are destined to play an increasingly important role. Nigeria will have 47 million Catholics by 2050, and has the human capital and ecclesiastical infrastructure to become an African 'voice' in the global church". (Allen, 96)

This bloom and blossom of the African Catholic Church is not only limited to an exponential population growth. Liturgy in African Catholic churches is "not a staid moral duty performed amid pomp and rigid ritual beneath the stained glass of one of Europe's cavernous and magnificent cathedrals" but a vitality of worship and an exuberance of pastoral activities. (Leonard 2005) John Allen further added that "Seminaries here are full, and vocations to the religious life are booming, parishes are very strong. Catholic spirituality here is very devotional, with lots of pious leagues and societies. (Allen 2007) This Church is truly the hope of the future of the church. (Onyalla 160) The question, though, might still remain on the nature and veracity of such a number.

Wider analyses rooted in the consideration of a multiplicity of variable are beginning to demonstrate the return of the religious and religion in the public and private fora. This return of the religious culture does coincide with correlate to and compliment the evolution of modern media of communication.

Ihejirike Walter (2006), like David Martin (2002), appraised the role of the mass media in the flourish of different religious practices in modern times especially the charismatic and Pentecostal. For Eickelman and Anderson (1999), a greater Muslim public have been created with the use of the media so that "Religion finds technology". Bierdorjer and Meyer called this resurrection of religion within the diffusion of media as "entanglement of religion and media". (4) Derrida tags this collaborative relation between the media and the resurgence of religion as 'the mediatic manifestation of religion' (61). This return of the religious in modern *sit im leben,* 'reintroduces a new sort of transcendental fiduciary'. (63)

The correlation of religion and media brings to the fore the ancient and often unacknowledged 'irreducible bond between religion and media.'[2] Religion and media interact and intermingle on many fronts. However, an overt characteristic of the two is in the act of mediation. Religion can be understood as an experience of mediation between the sacred and the secular, the transcendent and the human. Likewise media usage is an exercise in mediation as much as all art. And all religious experiences are mediated experiences though not necessarily mass-mediated. What then happens when these two modes of mediation meet?

Within the web of a growing interfacing between mass media and religion in a globalized and multicultural intermingling, there is an imminent need for an inter-relational, interdisciplinary study of the phenomena outside the limited scope of a purely disciplinary fidelity to the study of media or religion. (Plate 15) Within the same matrix of enlarged multicultural scenery divesting outside the frontiers of the Christian-Euro-America scenario, the analysis of the interaction of media and religion must assume multiplicity of variables.

From such interactivity between media and religion in contemporary society, the two therefore execute a reciprocal influence on each other. Of the religion birthed out of this unusual amalgam, it has been observed that, "we are heirs to religions that are designed precisely to cooperate with science and technology." (Derrida 61) The recognition of the reciprocal influence of the media on the resurgence of religion and of the form of the religious resurgence is once again validating the utility of some of the views inherent in the nexus of Marshal McLuhan's media conjectures. This is what is today transmuted and renowned as the theory of 'remediation' and its double logic of 'immediacy and hypermediation'.

In McLuhan, the media extends the senses of man so that when a new medium is introduced within a culture, a new sense ratio is orchestrated. (McLuhan 7) "The content of any medium is always another medium." (8) It is a result of this that

existing processes are amplified or accelerated." (8) However, McLuhan presumed a passively docile cultural submission to technology of media and seems to undermine the content of the varied media. The theory of media as a remediation therefore gives a more ample field for an understanding of the rapport of media and culture within the wider gamut of a historico-cultural dynamics.

According to the theory of remediation with its double logic of immediacy and hypermedia, modern media promise to deliver reality qua reality unmediated, a promise of absolute transparency. It therefore seeks to efface its media. To carry out its act of immediacy, media must however assume within its grammar multiple ranges of other media technologies which in the long run short-change its immediacy. Media must re-mediate because "The logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave in the presence of the thing represented." (Bolter & Grusin 5) However, "immediacy depends on hypermediacy." (Bolter & Grusin 5) The push for immediacy impels borrowing from other media and at times repurposing, refashioning the old media assumed in the new ambient. An example is an internet page like CNN which would need to borrow the technology of video to show its clips. Through the act of 'remediation', old and new media are refashioned, accentuating different arts and appealing to different senses. It therefore influences the act of experiencing through the remediation.

It is no fallacy to assume that modern man sees himself through the optics of his media. "We understand ourselves as the reconstituted station point of the artist or the photographer. When we watch a film or a television broadcast, we become the changing point of view of the camera." (Bolter & Grusin 231) This does not imply an inescapable technological determinism but that "we employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity. New media offer new opportunities for self-definition." (Bolter & Grusin 231) As new media are installed within the equilibrium of a culture, representational modes are affected and different media appeals to different senses and extend different senses. When religion is remediated, it is also refashioned. New medium is potent with the potential for a new mode of representation and of experiencing subject to reception according to the cultural heritage and personality dispositions.

The Question

If a new medium therefore remediates older media in its striving for immediacy creating a forum for a different form of repurposing, refashioning and experiencing, how then does the presence of the Nigerian video films (New Media) repurpose an older culture of religion in Nigeria? Cognizant of the importance of the images of God in people's *weltanschauung*, how do the modes of the manifestation of the

transcendental in the popular video films affect the religious imagination of the viewers of the films?

As Christian Hearth and Paul Luff, asserted, "it has long been recognized that video, and before that film, provide the social sciences with an unprecedented opportunity to analyze human culture and social organization". (Hearth & Luff 2008) It is the hope of this paper, therefore, that an inter-relational analysis of the media and religion in Nigeria can grant us a greater understanding of the Nigerian socio-cultural environment.

A New Media in Nigeria

Nollywood, the Nigerian video-film industry, has become a magnificent surprise to many who took it for granted. Nollywood has established itself as a major source of entertainment in Nigeria and beyond. Given the visual character of the video, what is the nature of religious epiphany in Nigerian video films? How does Nollywood negotiate with the popular religious worldview in Nigeria? Because the religious content is wide and this forum does not have infinity of space, this paper has chosen to focus on what is most central to most religions and particularly fundamental to African religions: the relationship with, and anticipation of, the transcendent.

The Nigerian video film touches and represents basically almost all the variety of issues that affect African life in general and Nigerian culture in particular despite its diversity in content. However, it is worth noting that while Nigerian films remediate almost every aspect of the Nigerian life, Ukah emphasises the fact that "religion has come to occupy a disproportionately high place." (Ukah, 204) In the words of Ukah, Nollywood can be conceived as a forest of religious symbolism. In other words while Nollywood touches on almost all aspects of Nigerian life religion holds a very high proportion.

Ukah (203-208) still emphasizes the political economy of religious representation in Nigerian video films. The plethora of religious representations in Nollywood follows the line of religious affiliation and marketing. This is such that for the Pentecostal film producer, tenets of Pentecostalism abound, while in films made by Muslims, the article of Islamic faith has the upper hand and are more victorious and efficacious compared to others. This also holds true for Catholicism and other religious affiliations.

One of the most scholarly responses to the question of religion in the African home video films that is inspirational to this research comes from the Amsterdam professor of religious research, Birgit Meyer. Among her many salient points, she described the remediation of religion in Nigerian video films as the resurgence of a

Pentecostal spirituality. "Video-film producers in Ghana and Nigeria have framed their movies in line with Pentecostal concerns, while at the same time the encounter with film and television has transformed Christianity and drawn it into the sphere of entertainment." (Meyer 2) According to the scholar, "This image economy, I contend, plays a crucial role in designing a new public sphere replete with Pentecostal Christianity." (Meyer 186) With regard to the remediation of the divine in the home video films, she rightly noted: "The remediation of the divine through the instrument of the video gives 'room to a new form of spectatorship' and techno-reality." (290)

Meyer buttresses her stand on the Pentecostal prevalence in the interface with video films on the ground of certain facts. One of these facts which she did her doctoral research is the demonization of traditional religion. While that is true, in many films, that cannot be attributed to the emergence of Christianity alone on the ground that, the dualistic framework within which Pentecostalism seems to thrive now was long present in traditional Africa. African religions were very much aware of the negative power of the influence of witches and wizards and the counter power of positive sacrifices to good spirits long before Christianity set foot on the soil of Africa. This war paradigm among traditional religions finds expression in some modern African films where the battle between the good and the evil spiritual forces is by no means relegated to the drama between a Pentecostal good God and traditional bad African demons, but within forces prevalent in Africa without recourse to Pentecostal spirituality.

The pre-eminence of Pentecostal spirituality in the African public space has also compelled the African church, in Meyer's view, to accept and promote the catholic charismatic renewal. Here, the acceptance of Pentecostalism in West African catholic churches was contingent on the fear of losing her members to Pentecostals. According to her, "Even some mission churches have incorporated pentecostally-oriented prayer groups in order to prevent their members from leaving the church." (Meyer 1995) In the footnote, she mentions catholicism precisely. Here too lies the tying of variables to a theoretical whole, variables that have no relationship to the assumed theoretical corpus. For catholics precisely, the emergence of charismatic spirituality in the Church despite the struggle between the orthodox church and the charismatic movement has a deeper root than the emergence of pentecostalism in Africa. It was a phenomenon that was by no means peculiar to West Africa but a whole Catholic phenomenon beginning from America through Europe to Africa.

The new wave of the production of video films in Africa was not the prodcution of a particular guided school of thought: pentecostal, but the assumption of styles that was more prevalent in the people's culture so that the assumption of a 'root culture

paradigm' holds better promise of plausibility than the pentostacal attribution assumed by Meyer. As Meyer herself wrote, "the accessibility of video technology enabled not only pentecostasl-charismatic cultures which embraced these new opportunities... but also enabled initially untrained film lovers to produce and market their own feature films." (Meyer 157)

My contention and difference of stance gleaned from the analyses of the films is articulated in the return of a character that was long prevalent in the African religio-cultural *weltanschauung*: a pragmatic hierophany.[3] "Pragmatic" is employed with roots informed by William James but also inspite of his notion. In William James, pragmatism is defined in practical significance. According to William James:

> To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve-what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conceptions of these effects, whether immediate or remote, are then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all. (James 18)

Sequence to his pragmatic principle, his *varieties of religious experience* can be viewed reducibly albeit, as exemplification of his theory to show some pragmatic effects of religious experiences (James, 47). And amidst the varieties of religious experiences he enunciated, one cord seems to tie them all, the pragmatic consequence of such an experience.

This pragmatic tendency in African Traditional Religions and as employed in this paper to describe one of the modes of the manifestation of the transcendent in Nigerian Video Films can be understood on two counts. One is the anticipation of the divine in pragmatic-utilitarian notions. This is present in situations where the divine is sought to meet the day-to-day concrete needs of the people like food, drink, healing, protection, success and deliverance from evil. Related to the first pragmatic utilitarian anticipation of the intervention of, and relationship with the sacred, necessarily follows the second defined in visible signs. By the necessary consequence of verification, the pragmatic utilitarian relationship assumes the form of a pragmatic-empirical, sensational, tactile manifestation. [4]

By commonality of such a denominator in Africa, the plethora of film and video makers though of diverse origins, assume basically a similarity of pattern. From a pilot study of the hierophany in Nigerian films, this paper conjectures the fact that the mode

of the manifestation of the transcendental in Nigerian video-films is as multiple and variant as are the films. However, in these myriad modes of representing the manifestation/perception of the transcendental in the Nigerian video-films, the multiplicity of particular styles seems to buy into a prevailing mode of representation: techno-visualization of spiritual forces.

In the video language of "modern" Nollywood, the pragmatic manifestation is remediated in 'voyeuristic' terms creating, as has been earlier attested, a 'spectatorship of the spirit' through the utility of techno-and video special effects. The pragmatic manifestation of the divine is articulated in the intervention of the divine in such a way that it bears semblance to the concept of *deus ex machina* and at once departs from it. The concept of *deus ex machina* does not define the reality of the hierophany in Nigerian video-films because the divine intervention falls very much within the logic of the African world-view not as a transcendent being breaking into the natural realms to salvage it but as a transcendent/immanent reality.

According to Mbiti, "because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life; wherever the African is there is religion." (Mbiti 2) The distinction in the African concept between a transcendent and an immanent divinity is *non tenet acqua*. Divinity is at once immanent and transcendent in most African religions and Nigerian religious experience, in particular.

It is the conviction of the paper that the remediation of 'pragmatic hierophany ' is a major key to understanding the current of religion and religious affiliation in Nigerian and most African countries. It is through the prism of the remediation of pragmatic hierophany that we can understand the co-existence of corruption and religion, political insanity and deep religious reliance in Nigeria. The Pentecostal/ charismatic spirituality, because it re-echoes the pragmatic hierophany - a cultural heritage that seems to have been embedded in the religious unconscious of the African does flourish naturally in Africa. But pragmatism underscores functionalism and functionalism must show in a visual ambience.

Patterns of Remediation in Nollywood Films

An x-ray of a few films depicts this modality of the representation of the holy or the intervention of the gods in the drama of humanity. Such patterns of the representation of the intervention of the gods are prevalent in films like *Power Change Hands, Light and Darkness, Total Destruction, Sin of the father*. Because of the visual logic of these films as a medium, the artists and producers of the films

represent the intervention of the gods in overtly 'voyeuristic' terms creating a spectatorship of the spirit.

The intervention of the gods in some films is displayed especially in the context of war (when traditional medicine men confront one another, or a different deity) when the pragmatic efficacy is manifested as fire shooting out of the staff of one priest against the other, thunder striking one at the desire of another. A lot of time, the intervention and efficacy of the gods on behalf of men are shown in very visible and visual contests. In the matrix of the representation of the invisible in the visible medium like Nollywood does, the invisible is made visible through fire, water, wind, earth or strange signs orchestrated through video effects. This mode and manner of the representation of the gods in Nollywood falls within a larger drive of modern society in what has been described as a visual culture.

The Global Recognition of the Visual Culture by Scholars

From Harold Innis, Walter Ong, Marshal McLuhan, Neil Postman to the new trends in media ecology, the conception that the media's impact is contingent on the content permissible through a given medium has continued to be debunked in the realization that the 'medium is the message'. This awakening to the impact of the media as technology on the prevailing cultural tenets has widened the horizon of media analysis beyond the Lasswellian parameters of source, content, audience and channel analysis. According to Graham Mcphee (2002), modern society is a visual society.

Visual culture studies recognize the predominance of visual forms of media, communication, and information in the postmodern world. Thus, visual culture celebrates the centrality of image flows occasioned by the predominance of visual technologies in the diverse arenas of both the private and the public. According to the American National Education Association, "Western civilization has become more dependent than ever, on visual culture, visual artefacts and visual communication as a mode of discourse and a means of developing a social and cultural identity."(NEAA 2011) This visual characterization of modern society affects both the so-called low cultures as well as the high cultures.

Guy Debord may have gleaned this succinctly when he noted in his *Society of Spectacles* that "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles." (2008) Apaslan endorses the definition of modern society as an image society when he argues that "We face a shift from text-based communication to image saturation today. This shift is also dramatically reflected in the field of art education today." (Alpaslan 1)

The thesis of the visual culture does not in any way negate the other senses. This is because the visual works with the other senses too. Bal argues that the notion of visual culture does not imply an exclusively visual experience but visual experience is itself synaesthetic involving other sense-laden and sense-based activities, such as listening, reading, movement and touch. (Bal 9)

Debord wrote that, "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." (2008:4) While visual culture is society's strategy of how we perceive and interpret reality, it is worth noting that the visible is naturally not just self-evident "but arises out of a set of social and cultural exigencies that create the conditions for *seeing* a particular phenomenon or artefact." (Becker, 2008)

Conclusion

In the visual ambience of modern cultural scenario, there is the accentuation of visibility. Whether one buys into the logic of the visual as social relations or as an effect of the predominance of visual technologies, a common denominator is that modern society privileges the visual and reinforces this through the multiplex of technologies that promotes it. From the print images and graphic design, TV and cable TV, film and video in all interfaces and playback/display technologies, computer interfaces and software design, Internet/Web as a visual platform, digital multimedia, advertising in all media (a true cross-media institution), fine art and photography, fashion, to architecture, design, and urban design, modern technologies promote the visual.

Further to this, in the ambience of an ever-increasing visual culture, religion's representations assume the language of the visual culture thereby creating a fecund ground for the promotion of the very spectacular aspects of religious practices and silencing through minimal reportage of aspects of religion that do not flow with the visual logic. Within the same cultural matrix that privileges the visual and the logic of an improved aesthetical representation, when religion is remediated, it naturally buys into the logic of visibility orchestrated by prevailing technologies and culture. In the throes of the visual culture, religious experiences shift from the context of just the heart to the display screen where the impact and effect must be represented. This imposes a frame of representation on religion and poses a challenge to religious representation. If religion is and it is functional, it should be seen. Can this visual ground hone the pattern of religious experience? Our middle ground answer is in the affirmative: the ground demands a religious representation that must show as long as the visual culture has become a prevailing global culture.

Notes

[1] Meyer thus responds to the roots of religious resurgence as found in Manuel Castells' *The Information Age* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Castells did ascribe the rise of fundamentalist Islam to the failed attempt by Muslims to attain an admirable modernization and as such exhibit a reaction against such modernistic traits they could not attain, the evil globalization. Similarly he attributes the rise of Christian fundamentalism to the reaction against the uncontrollable forces of globalization. For Meyer, the rise of these religions is far more explainable by their adoption and use of the modern media than by a reactive reaction.

[2] Religion in whatever form it has ever existed has in one way or the other availed itself of the service of mediation. In whatever religious context one may choose to evaluate, there is enshrined within the fabric of the religious life, the attempt to mediate between the visible and the invisible, between the supernatural and the natural. The mediated religious experiences however have to be carried over from one generation to the other. This act of transmission of religion from one epoch to another epoch; from one generation to another generation entails strongly the act of mediation to the employment of different forms of media, from ancient hagiographies and sacred stories to the modern mass-mediated religion. (De Vries 2001, Derrida and Vatimo 1998, Meyer and Moor 2006, Plate 6)

[3] Hierophany is assumed here simply as "a manifestation of the divine." Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion (*New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958, 7). This paper chose to focus on the manifestation of the divine in African films because that is what is most central and common to most African religious thought. As Mbiti rightly observes, African religious beliefs are totally concerned with belief in God, belief in Spirits… J. S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religions.* (London: Heinemman, 1975)

[4] Pragmatism according to William James likewise "represent a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed…pragmatist turns …towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. (ibid 20)

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