



**“God Has Instructed Me to Sell”:
Questioning the Practice of Commercialization of Religion
in Neo-Prophetic and Pentecostal/ Charismatic Churches
in Ghana.**

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ABSTRACT

Christianity in Ghana today appears to have taken on a business-like outlook. It is generally characterised by the sale and purchase of assortments of religious items and services between churches and religious consumers, abuses and financial extortion. This raises the question: why is it that a practice that the ancient Prophets of Yahweh (God) and Jesus Christ condemned continues to be perpetuated by pastors/prophets of God today? Thus, this study sets out to portray and question the continuous practice of commercialisation of religion as reflected in most Neo-Prophetic and Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches in Ghana.

Keywords: religion, God, instruction, churches, commercialisation, Ghana.

Introduction

“Commercialisation of Religion” dates back to Biblical times. In the Old Testament establishment for instance, Prophets such as Amos, Micah and Ezekiel decried the practice.¹ Prophet Amos for instance, who spoke vehemently against the practice was opposed by Amaziah who was actively engaged in the practice. For Amaziah, Amos was behaving like a 'political agitator' and that there were no divine underpinnings of his prophecies.

Like Amos, Prophet Micah and Prophet Ezekiel also precluded the practice. This was because the religious leaders perverted justice through the act of bribery and deceitful business practices, desecrated

¹ Princewell A. Nwanganga, Church Commercialization in Nigeria: Implications for Public Relations Practice. *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 28, (2017): 3. See: Amos 2:8:5, 4:1; 5:11; 8:4- 6; 6,8; 4:4; 5:7,10; and 6:12.

worship places, oppressed the poor and vulnerable, and allowed idolatry and violence. Besides, the religious leaders served the people with the motive of earning economic benefits, but not for the sake of stewardship, which was their core role as priests.² In other words, they were much concerned with their selfish gains and nourishment but not for God and His people.

Commercialisation of religion in the New Testament establishment was somewhat similar to the Old Testament period. Like Amos, Micah, and Ezekiel, Jesus Christ also condemned the practice. He registered his displeasure especially, against those who were vibrantly engaged in money changing and doves selling in the Temple. According to Barbara E. Reid,³ it was obligatory for every Jew to pay a Temple tax of one-half shekel a year during the Passover feast. The payment of taxes and the exchanging of Greek, Roman, and Parthian coins into shekels of Tyre, which were the acceptable payment for Temple taxes since they had the highest purity of silver became very profitable that Church leaders became more actively involved in this practice than leading the people into worship.⁴

Saint Jerome and Thomas P. Scheck⁵ also observed that whiles the church leaders engaged in the practice, they exchanged the monies at higher rates and duped the poor. Warren Carter⁶ also revealed that apart from the money exchange, the sale of doves became popular during this same festive period. This was because the doves became substitute sacrificial animals for the poor, lepers, and women who had to purify

² See: Micah (3:11; 6:11; 73) Revised Standard Version.

³ Barbara E. Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew. The New Collegeville Bible Commentary*, v. 1. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, (2005): 104.

⁴ Barbara E. Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 106.

⁵ Saint Jerome, & Thomas P. Scheck, *Commentary on Matthew*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, (2008): 236.

⁶ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading*. The Bible & Liberation Series. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, (2000): 419; See: (Lev 12:6-8, 14:22, 15:14, 29).

themselves after childbirth. William Barclay⁷ on his part revealed that the Temple doves were sold at expensive price. The price was about fifteen times expensive compared to the ones sold outside the Temple. The author further indicated that the church leaders hyped the price of the doves because the poor had no option to buy those ones, since Temple inspectors usually found faults and did not accept the ones that were brought to the Temple by people.

The nature of the practice vis-à-vis Jesus Christ's conviction that the Temple was not to be desecrated, but meant to be a place of worship outraged him. This propelled him to stop, and scatter the tables and seats of those engaged in the commercialisation process in the Temple.

Moving away from Biblical times, I turn my attention to Ghana. Religion, as expressed in Ghana is so pervasive that at almost every vantage point, one finds a church, shrine or mosque. In most cases, the churches outnumber the mosques and shrines. Due to this, each church yearns for church membership. In their bid to get membership, seek for a niche and hegemony, the churches engage themselves in a brisk unhealthy competition. In this competition, each church attempts to outdo the other by putting up strategies, items and services.⁸

This competition has also generated into the sale and purchase of items and services between Pentecostal/Charismatic and Neo-Prophetic Churches and desperate Ghanaian religious consumers. Whereas in this commercial interaction, religious consumers are said to go through several cases of abuses and financial extortion, religious consumers and pastors/prophets seem not to see anything wrong with the practice; given that the practice was resented by the ancient Prophets of Yahweh (God) and Jesus Christ.

This situation raises the question: why is it that a practice that the ancient Prophets of Yahweh (God) and Jesus Christ condemned

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New Daily Study Bible. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, (2001): 286.

⁸ See George Anderson Jnr, Ghana's Neo-Prophetic Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity: Future Prospects, *ERATS*, 1, 1, (2019):16.

continues to be perpetuated by pastors/prophets of God today? Thus, this study sets out to portray and question the continuous practice of commercialisation of religion as reflected in most Neo-Prophetic and Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches in Ghana.

Methodology

The main objective of this study is to find out the reasons why a practice that the ancient Prophets of Yahweh (God) and Jesus Christ precluded continues to be perpetuated by Ghanaian Pastors/Prophets who are God's representatives on earth. Data were collected through unstructured qualitative interviews and participatory observation in four Churches, namely Ebenezer Miracle Worship Centre, House of Prayer for All Nations, The Church of Bethesda, and House of Prayer Ministries in Kumasi, Cape Coast and Accra.

The phenomenological approach was adopted and it helped the study to avoid being judgemental, but rather allowed the facts of religion as intended in the churches speak for themselves. Accordingly, the study observed the principles of *epoché* and *eidetic* intuition as Edmund Husserl⁹ proposed in qualitative studies. While the principle of *epoché* helped in barring preconceived notions, the *eidetic intuition* helped the study to occupy itself with the essential information needed for analysis.

The study involved 20 respondents (12 men and 8 women). Of the 12 men, 4 were Head Pastors/Prophets of the 4 selected Churches and 2 Deacons/Church Elders from each church were also interviewed. The study also selected 8 women who were Deaconess/Church Elders, 2 each from the 4 selected churches for the purpose of interview. The four churches were purposefully chosen because they were well known to be engaged briskly in the sale of religious items and services to their clientele. The research activities took place in the months of August to November 2018. Finally, yet importantly, the primary data were supplemented with secondary data.

⁹ James K. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, (rev. ed.). New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, (2010): 28-30.

Commercialisation of Religion

'Commercialisation' is a relative term. It has different contextual meaning. In other words, different disciplines define the term to suit their context. The term may either mean; the process of introducing or launching, and the act of selling and buying a product/commodity, and service in a market environment to consumers with or without the use of the media.¹⁰

In the study of religion, 'Commercialisation of religious items and services' assumes different names such as *church commercialisation*, *commercialisation of religion*, *ecclesiastic marketing*, *church marketing*, and *religious marketing*. In *The Divine Deceit: Business in Religion*, Fidelis K. Obiora as cited by Princewell A. Nwanganga¹¹ observed that the term *church commercialisation* first, designates the application of commercial/business principles to run a church as a business entity with the intent of making economic gains. Second, the author indicated that the term depicts the manipulation of

¹⁰ Rana Eijaz Ahmad & Abida Eijaz, Commercialisation of Religion in Pakistan. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 1, 2, (2011):186.

¹¹ Princewell A. Nwanganga, Church Commercialization in Nigeria: Implications for Public Relations Practice. *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 28, (2017): 3.

church/Christianity, its services (spiritual and emotional) with the motive of exploiting church members or prospects for economic or financial gain.

The explanations to the term above resonate with Ann Sherman and James F. Devlin¹² who in *American and British Clergy Attitudes Towards Marketing Activities: A Comparative Study*, showed that church commercialisation or 'ecclesiastic marketing' involves the application of marketing techniques in order to spread a religion, to attract proselytes and to obtain loyalty. The authors argued that this method is increasingly used by different religious groups, through specific institutions such as churches or praying buildings and missions in order to get the wanted answer from a target market. For them, religious leaders stick to the 'Seven P Formula' – i.e. *product, price, promotion, place, packaging, positioning, and people* to sell religion to their targeted group.

Following the authors above, Princewell A. Nwanganga¹³ observed that church commercialisation means every action, activities of church leaders, pastors, and prophets, that have economic or profit making annotation. By this exposition by the author, we gather that church commercialisation means converting the church's core mandate of soul winning, attending to spiritual and emotional needs of church members with the primary aim of accruing financial gains and wealth.

Apart from the concept of ecclesiastic marketing, there is, 'church marketing'. Robert E. Stevens, et al.¹⁴ in *Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organisation Marketing*, observe that church marketing involves a religious engagement between churches and members where religious items and services for sale are made available to members. This type of marketing involves an analysis, planning, and management of voluntary exchange between a church or religious organisation and its constituents for the purpose of mutual satisfaction of needs. In addition, church marketing concentrates on the analysis of

¹³ Princewell A. Nwanganga, *Church Commercialization in Nigeria*, 3.

¹⁴ Robert E. Stevens, David L. Loudon, Bruce Wrenn, & Henry Cole. *Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organization Marketing*. New York: The Haworth Reference Press, (2005): 77.

constituents' needs, developing programs to meet these needs, providing these programs at the right time and place, communicating effectively with constituents, and attracting the resources needed to underwrite the activities of the organisation.

From the discussions above, the general understanding of commercialisation of religion is: an activity that involves the sale of religious items and services to consumers of religion by a church. But, from the research units, I gathered that commercialisation of religion does not mean selling and buying of religious items and services, rather, “sacrifice or offertory”, *afɔrebɔ* or *afɔdeɛ*. The belief attached to this understanding is that money given by congregants in receipt of religious items or service is a contribution, offertory or sacrifice one is making towards expanding God's kingdom and ministry but not selling and buying — commercialisation of religion.

The Way Commercialisation of Religion Takes Place in the Churches

The approach differs from church to church. In Ebenezer Miracle Worship Centre for instance, I gathered that before Prophet Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom commercialises the religious items, he informs the congregation to prepare. At the same time, two of his Associate Pastors place two offertory boxes in front of the pulpit and stand by them. The Prophet offers prayers by invoking God's blessings on those congregants who will buy the items; after which he invites them to bring their monies. He commences the sale of the Separator of fight and collector of fights, *Ɔpata ko agye ko abɔwobo*, religious items. Congregants, who come, give their monies to the Associate Pastors. The Associates Pastors also give the money to the Prophet who usually stands behind them and drops the money into the offertory boxes.

After this, the Associate Pastors give each congregant a card/coupon before the latter take their seat. Usually, the cards/coupons come in different colours per the amount of money one has paid. Congregants who pay GH ₵2000 (US\$ 500), GH ₵1000 (US\$ 250), and GH ₵500 (US\$ 125) respectively for the Separator of fight and collector of fights, *Ɔpata ko agye ko abɔwobo*, religious items receive red, blue, and green card/coupons respectively. Congregants who pay GH ₵200

(US\$ 50), GH ₵100 (US\$ 25), and GH ₵50 (US\$ 12.5) for Iron cuts iron, *Dadie bi twa dadie*, anointing oil are also given cards/coupons. After the Separator of fight and collector of fights, *Ɔpata ko agye ko abɔwobo*, religious items have been sold, the Prophet sells the Iron cuts iron, *Dadie bi twa dadie*, anointing oil, which also comes in small bottles and cellophanes.

Concurrently, the Associate Pastors and ushers stand at vantage points to receive money from congregants before they collect their anointing oil from the Prophet himself. Congregants who pay GH ₵20, GH ₵10, GH ₵5, and GH ₵2 do not receive cards/coupons. They are given the oil instantly without cards. Congregants who pay for the Separator of fight and collector of fights, *Ɔpata ko agye ko abɔwobo*, religious items wait after church service to collect their items. Normally, the Associates Pastors group the people according to the amount each paid and are served in the same manner of grouping.¹⁵

In Ɔdiyifo Acquah's Church of Bethesda, congregants queue to give money to the Prophet and are given soap, perfume, Florida water, or have their feet and hands washed with a mixture of water and Florida water or head sprinkled with the same mixture. In House of Prayer Ministries and House of Prayer for All Nations, congregants also pay for small bottles of anointing oil and are given spiritual guidance, *akwankyerɛ*.

Religious Items Commercialised in the Churches

Joy Hendry,¹⁶ and Russell Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John Sherry¹⁷ explicate religious or sacred items as tangible and intangible things that

¹⁵ Field data collected through participatory observation from August 14 – 19, and October 9 – 26, 2018.

¹⁶ Joy Hendry, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology: Other People's Worlds*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Press Ltd., (1999): 38.

¹⁷ Russell Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John Sherry, The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 6, (June 1989):11.

are symbolically linked with, and objectify the sacred. In other words, religious items are sacred things that have religious significance, value, and are used to enhance religious performances. The rosary, crucifix, Bible, Qur'an, Tasbih, talisman, wand, amulets, and holy water are some examples of tangible religious items. There are also magic formulae, dances, crests, names, and songs that are some examples of intangible religious items. These items are usually approached with both attraction and fear.

An important dimension to the explanation of religious items the scholars above seem to overlook is the fact that there are some items that may not necessarily have any symbolic link with, and objectifies the sacred but can be made a religious item through prayers to have a symbolic link to objectify the sacred. It is in the light of this weakness in the definition of religious items that the study extends the definition scope. In that sense, the term religious item/product as used in this study means any item/product with or without a religious value and significance but has been prayed over by a prophet or pastor to have a symbolic link with, and objectifies the sacred. Scholars such as George Anderson Jr.¹⁸ Roland Owusu-Ansah¹⁹ and others²⁰ have revealed that Neo-Prophetic and Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches in Ghana sell

¹⁸ George Anderson Jnr, Ghana's Neo-Prophetic Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity: Future Prospects, *ERATS*, 1, 1, (2019):22.

¹⁹ Roland Owusu-Ansah, *The Usage of Anointing Oil in some Charismatic and Neo-Prophetic Churches in Kumasi in the Context of Leviticus 8:1-12 and James 5:14-15*. Unpublished MPhil Thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, (2011): 154.

²⁰ Brenda Gainer, & Paulette Padanyi, Applying the Marketing Concept to Cultural Organisations: An Empirical Study of the Relationship between Market Orientation and Performance. *International Journal of Non-profit & Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 7, 2, (2002): 182-193; Karen Lauterbach, Wealth and Worth: Pastors and Neo-Pentecostalism in Kumasi, *Ghana Studies*, 9, (2006): 91; Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Contemporary Prophetism in Kumasi: A Sociocultural and Theological Assessment. *Herald Journal of Education and General Studies*, 2, 1, (2013): 64.

fertility, 'baby toffees', salvation, anointing oil; and guidance and counselling.

In the research units, I gathered from The Church of Bethesda, religious items such as soap (Black, Rose, Rope, Jabon, Sulphur, Pacholi scented, Healing (*ayaresa*) Rue Cyclarine, Sandara, and Money soaps),²¹ Florida water and perfumes (money or jackpot spray) as the religious items Prophet Philip K. Acquah sells to his congregants. In Ebenezer Miracle Worship Centre, Prophet Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom sells Separator of fight and collector of fights, *Ɔpata ko agye ko abɔwobo* (anointing oil with eggs); and Iron cuts iron, *Dadie bi twa dadie* anointing oil to his congregants. Other religious items and services such as breaking anointing oil and well-water, *Aburamu Nsuo*;²² and counselling are not sold to congregants.

Results and Discussion

This section of the paper presents the findings from the study by addressing the main research objective and question that guided the study.

Responding to the research question, “*why is it that a practice that the ancient Prophets of Yahweh (God) and Jesus Christ condemned continues to be perpetuated by pastors/prophets of God today?*”, the pastors/prophets argued by indicating that although the practice was precluded in ancient times, God has a new purpose for His creation in

²¹ The black soap is used to combat and triumph over satanic forces. Rose soap glues people (couple, family members, friends, work associates, and people of influence), together. Rope Soap is three in one box soap tied with a rope which is antidote to loss of memory. Accountants, students, scientist and other professionals patronise this soap. Healing (*ayaresa*) soap heals all kinds of ailments.

²² *Aburamu Nsuo* as is an Asante Twi rendition of water extracted from a well, which is located in the premises of Ebenezer Miracle Worship Centre. It is believed that the water in the well has the power to heal disease, and to protect people from their atamfo, and witches/wizards.

present days and no human being has the moral obligation to instruct or question God on what to do or not to do.

Prophet Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom for instance, underscored that, his engagement in the practice is divinely motivated. He indicated that in a dream he saw a bottle of anointing oil in the midst of flaming fire and God instructed him to make the use of anointing oil central to his ministry. He added that he was instructed to give the oil to any congregant or person who gave money to support his ministry. It is for that reason he gives the oil to people who contribute their financial resources to the growth of the church. The Prophet maintained that it is erroneous for anyone to refer to the practice as selling and buying – commercialisation of religion. For him, it is an offertory or sacrifice, *afɔrebɔ* or *afɔdee* in support of God's work.²³

Prophet Philip K. Acquah of the Church of Bethesda and the other pastors argued that it is God's will that human beings become free from the works of Satan and his agents; and the financial problems of this world so that they become prosperous. It is for such reason God has instructed them to prepare religious items that are capable of solving congregants' problems to fulfil God's plan for them.

Another reason the pastors/prophets maintained was that the sale of the religious items is an avenue to raise financial resources to support the growth of God's kingdom. By this, they indicated that there are many people (lost souls) who need to be reached out to be told the word of God and to be partakers of His kingdom. Given this, financial resources are crucial at this point to be used to reach out to such people who are mostly in the remote areas. The pastors/prophets argued that it is very difficult to do God's work; and to reach out to such people who are in need and have not heard the word of God on empty stomach and without money.²⁴

²³ Interview with Prophet Ebenezer Opambour Yiadom on October 16, 2018.

²⁴ Interview with Prophet Philip K. Acquah on September 16, 2018; Prophet Ebenezer Opambour Yiadom on October 16, 2018, and Head Pastors of House of Prayer for All Nations and House of Prayer Ministries on October 26, 2018 and November 18, 2018; Church Elders of the four churches on October 16, 2018, September 16, 2018, October 26, 2018 and November 18, 2018.

From the respondents, we gather that the practice is motivated and prescribed by God. However, it is very difficult to reconcile the views of the respondents with the fact that the ancient prophets of Yahweh (God) and Jesus Christ precluded this same practice. In fact, it is very confusing and problematic to comprehend that God now endorses a practice He had resented. Though the views of the respondents cannot be completely flawed given that religious experience of the numinous is largely a subjective experiential affair, the paper argues that the quest for wealth creation and the lucrative nature of the practice is one of the major motivation for the perpetration of commercialisation of religion by Neo-Prophetic and Pentecostal/Charismatic pastors/prophets. This is because in the course of the study, I gathered that the respondents especially the Pastors/Prophets have become very rich, famous; and own and use expensive vehicles, range of businesses and houses. Hitherto, they did not own such great wealth and finances. This background check and personal observation to its logical conclusion discredits the position of my respondents that their engagement in commercialisation of religion is divinely motivated.

Apart from the above, there is the phenomenon of religious interdependency and opportunism between religious consumers and pastors/prophets. Here, religious consumers massively depend on pastors/prophets for their supernatural remedies to their problems whiles domineering and materialistic religious leaders take advantage of the religious artlessness, vulnerability and gullibility of religious consumers to enrich themselves and to control their minds.

The religio-cultural worldview of Ghanaians is also an important reason why the practice persists. In fact, there is the general belief among Africans including Ghanaians that the forces of evil are in constant scuffle with the successes of humankind; and that every mishap has a spiritual dimension. In that regard, there is the need for one to be protected from malevolent forces in order to be successful in life.²⁵ In that

2018, September 16, 2018, October 26, 2018 and November 18, 2018.

²⁵ See Cephas Narh Omenyo & Abamfo Ofori Atiemo, *Claiming Religious Space: The Case of Neo-Propheticism in Ghana*. *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*,

sense, Africans/Ghanaians express belief and confidence in any engagement that will provide them with solutions their socio-religio-cultural pickles; protection against mishaps, and Satan and his agents. Arguably, this worldview appears to have influenced the religious activities of many pastors/prophets in Ghana to engage in brisk commercialisation of religious items and services in their bid to render spiritual solutions to the pickles of religious consumers.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the practice of commercialisation of religion as reflect in most Neo-Prophetic and Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches in Ghana. The main objective of the study was to portray and question the continuous practice of commercialisation of religion as reflected in most Neo-Prophetic and Pentecostal/ Charismatic Churches in Ghana using four churches as case studies. The argument was that Christianity in Ghana today appears to have taken on a business-like outlook, which is generally characterised by the sale and purchase of assortments of religious items and services between churches and religious consumers, abuses and financial extortion. This background therefore raised the question: why is it that a practice that the ancient Prophets of Yahweh (God) and Jesus Christ condemned continues to be perpetuated by pastors/prophets of God today?

The findings from the key informants were that it is a practice God has instructed them to undertake. Moreover, the practice generates financial resources to assist in the propagation of the Gospel to the unsaved and to assist the needy in society. Aside the views of the key

New Series, 1, 1, (July 2006): 62; Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, Magic: Its Nature and Meaning in Traditional Akan Society in Ghana. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 40, 1, (2008): 25-46. See also: Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, (1995): 77; Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*. Singapore: FEP International Private Ltd., (1978): 55-58.

respondents, the paper argued that the practice is perpetuated in present day because it is lucrative and brings wealth to the pastors/prophets. Moreover, the practice is stimulated by the religio-cultural worldview of Ghanaians, and finally, there is religious interdependency and opportunism between Ghanaian religious consumers and pastors/prophets.

In view of the findings, the paper suggests that religious consumers should be allowed to get their own items to be prayed over for use by pastors/prophets instead of pastors/prophets producing and selling the items to religious consumers at exorbitant fee. This will put a stop to the abuses and financial extortions religious consumers go through in Ghana in their search for supernatural solutions to their predicaments.

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- Interview with Church Elders of the four churches on October 16, 2018. September 16, 2018, October 26, 2018 and November 18, 2018.
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