Arts, Religion and the New Social Order: Emerging Trends in Mediation in an Age of Globalization

Esekong H. Andrew. **University of Calabar, Nigeria**

Abstract

The relationship between arts and religion as culturally interactive phenomena may not be strange, but the dimensions of synergy are complex and increasingly so in an age of globalization where art has evolved from its basic visual, literary and performative formalisms to a sophisticated institution supported by a network of media that traverse time and space. Similarly, religion has metamorphosed from the popular Marxist perception as "the opium of the people" to a multi-faceted institution, addressing not only the spiritual but also other wide-ranging social, political, cultural, economic and other needs. Supporting movements have also emerged within religious systems to echo the advocacy for a new social order through transparency, accountability, religious and cultural harmony, health awareness and other issues. The interests, though divergent are meant to address common and practical societal needs. It would appear that religious institutions, in a bid to cover extended interests in newly defined territories now incorporate performance-enhancing elements from allied disciplines. This is particularly apparent in Nigeria, the location of this study where the major religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion employ visual, performing and media arts to reach expanding audiences. The thesis of this paper, therefore, is that the ability of religion to perform its newly assumed tasks effectively is dependent, among other things upon the mastery of applied elements of visual, performing and media arts as promotional tools in mediating a new social order.

Introduction

Art is basically a means of self-expression and communication. Beyond these basic functions lay multi-faceted applications through which art can be used to address complex human problems. The visual, performing and literary arts have been applied to issues arising from social, cultural, economic, political and other interactions of man. They communicate cultural values to audiences (and readers) in time and space, using various genres. This paper is focused on the socio-cultural (religious) sector where art has become increasingly relevant in communicating and propagating religious values and mediating a new social order in Nigeria.

The presence of art in religion is not a strange phenomenon. From time, art has always been functional in creating substances or images on which conjectures of the Supreme Being in various religions could be concretized. Many carvings have been used in African Indigenous Religion to represent gods, goddesses and their mediators. In the Christian religion, images of Christ, the cross and the prophets, all of whom existed before the invention of the camera and other image-capturing devices have been recreated by artists

to enable adherents visualize the personalities. Similarly, the crescent and the star have been created as visual symbols for Islam. Beads have also been crafted for prayers and recitations. In the words of Stirner:

> Art is the beginning, the Alpha of religion, but it is also the end, its Omega. Even more, it is its companion. Without art or the idealistically creative artist, religion would not exist, but when the artist takes back his art unto himself, so religion vanishes… whenever art strides forth in its full energy, it creates a religion and studies of its source…(Art) produces a shape that might serve as an object of the understanding…(3)

Following the submission of Stirner and all the examples of religion-representing art earlier cited, art is either used as an image of worship or as a medium for worship and propagation of religious ideas.

Art is also a critical tool and its application in religious criticism has generated a few controversies. These are instances where artistic expressions conflict with religion. British Chris Ofili's collage, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) in elephant dung has been offensive to Christians, particularly Catholics. Jerry Springer's *The Opera* shown on BBC 2 in the United Kingdom, January 2005 was alleged by a group known as Christian Voices to be sacrilegious as it showed Jesus in a nappy. Perhaps the most topical are the series of cartoons showing Muhammad in a variety of satirical situations, published by Danish newspaper, Jyllands – Posten on September 30th 2005. The cartoons greatly offended extremist Moslems who responded violently in the Moslem world and parts of Europe. The controversy is reminiscent of the one whipped up by Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses, a novel that was considered blasphemous by Moslems, hence the declaration of death sentence *(fatwa)* on the author by Ayatollah Khonemi in 1988.. Similarly, the Indian artist, M. F. Husain's series of paintings, depicting Hindu gods and goddesses in sexual relationships is offensive to Hindus. In every case mentioned here, reactions have been based on heightened religious sensitivity of individuals and groups. On the whole, art has been more compatible than confrontational with religion. Over the years, new artistic media have emerged to support traditional art forms and to play new roles in publicity and communication and religions explore the potentialities of these new art forms towards publicizing their traditional and expanding interests.

Artistic Communication Media and Applications
Communication media consist of both arts and technology, but it would appear that media artistic considerations elicit a wider discourse. Edmunson remarks "Art today is the most radical possible criticism of all the clichés and conventions of the media" (17). Consequently, in categorizing media in terms of sources of delivery, reference is frequently made to traditional and contemporary artistic media. Traditional in this sense includes drawn, painted, sculpted, printed, and oral forms. Contemporary communication media of the 20th and 21st centuries, which are mostly technology-based, include television, video, film and Internet. It must also be stated that many contemporary media develop from basic traditional types. Granted the categories of communication media are clearly

delineated, what attributes would then qualify each medium to be described as artistic? To address this issue, we must re-examine common elements and principles of artistic composition which Gilbert and Macarthy refer to as "the vocabulary of art" (24). The ingredients making up the vocabulary of artistic composition differ according to the art form. The principles and elements, of visual expression are different from those used in performing and literary arts. But generally, certain elements and principles are common to all. The elements of shape, form, light (colour), space, time and motion; the principles of unity, variety, balance, rhythm and emphasis are found in almost all artistic creations. It can therefore be assumed that every medium of communication that engages some of these elements and some principles of artistic composition is an artistic communication medium. In the light of this definition and assumption, we can begin to examine selected traditional and contemporary media and their modes of application for communication. They are selected on the basis of relevance to religious publicity and impact on society. Three broad classifications are made here for an adumbrated discussion as follows: Two-dimensional visual and print media – painting, graphics etc. the performing arts - music, theatre and dance electronic media - television, radio, video, film and internet.

Two-dimensional media, particularly painting and graphics have been used in communication from prehistoric times. Billboards, posters and handbills are particularly useful in reaching out to wide audiences. The print media use textual and pictorial forms of expression. Its peculiarity lies in the mode of production, the volume and circulation of produced items. Sophisticated printing procedures using computers and process rotary printing machines now assist rapid production of messages and ideas. Enhanced transportation enables wide circulation of materials to literate audiences. The artistic character of the textual and pictorial elements adds value to printed materials and goes a long way towards influencing readability. The print medium is the main method of conveying literary ideas.

The performing arts, consisting of music, dance and theatre have gained unprecedented acceptability in Nigeria. Performances can either be made live or transmitted to audiences via radio, television or any other screen medium. The themes can be regulated to align with popular interests and to project ideologies. An ideal performance consists of a plot, characters, theme, language, melody and spectacle. The articulation of these principles is a matter style and the function for which the production is meant. Theatre on its own is a composite art, which unifies all the other arts into one-cohort production.

The electronic media are technology-based and digital technology is widely used in the transmission of audio-visual images via satellite to unlimited audiences across the globe. Ideas are broadcast mainly through the radio, television, video, film and Internet. The video/film industry is not only technology-based, but it is supported by a range of artistic specialties in scripting, acting, lighting and designing. The Internet is also a component of the electronic-based communication media. This medium provides an interactive forum for discourse and analysis of contentious issues that may be raised by users.

These communication media have been so highlighted to trace their relationships to the arts and to potential audiences, representing society, and to indicate the potential of each medium to be used as an art form in mediating new socio-religious interests.

Extended Religious Interest and the New Social Order in Nigeria
Religion, being an integral part of culture is a way of life in many cultures. In Nigeria, like in many other African centuries, religion is a passionate issue that can hardly be discussed lightly. In a country of more than one-hundred and fifty million people, the United State Department of State in their International Religious Freedom Report, says that 50% practice Islam, 40% are Christians and 10% practice exclusively Traditional Indigenous Religions or are agnostics. This, no doubt is a country of religious people who can become emotional if their religions and belief systems are cast in bad light. Because of actual or perceived religious differences, uncountable riots have erupted and lives have been lost in Nigeria. The passion attached to religion is understandable because in a country where the socio-economic conditions are unstable, religion appears to be the only hope for liberation. An attempt to destroy the fundamental structures of any religion in Nigeria is like destroying the last foundation of hope for survival. The widely quoted words of Marx become apt in describing the place of religion in Nigeria:

> Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless
> world, the soul of the soulless condition. It is the opium of the
> people (Emphasis mine). The abolition of religion as the illusory
> happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To
> call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to
> call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. (en.
> wikipedia.org/opium)

The metaphorical use of the word opium by Marx was probably derived from the overwhelming importance of opium as a painkiller the 19th century. Religion, like opium, becomes like a sedative to suppress the social injustice inflicted by insensitive governance in Nigeria. On the negative side, reactions to any perceived attack on religion, coupled with unwholesome practices and display of double standards by religious leaders seem to portray religion in bad light and seen to downplay any positive influence religion may have in the Nigerian society.

On the positive side, religion in Nigeria appears to have enormous potential for addressing contemporary social problems in Nigeria. Fagan's study of the impact of religious practices on social stability gives considerable evidence that religion is not all about violence and deceit. Fagan cites matrimonial stability, poverty reduction, morality, drug abuse, crime, mental health and depression as areas on which religion has exerted enormous positive impact (1 and 2). Religious groups are gradually withdrawing from traditional dogmatic positions to explore areas of comparative advantage in contributing towards improving the quality of life of the citizenry and towards building a new social order. Chiappalone rightly submits that "traditional religious dogmas are receding, divisive forces" and really hold little promise in creating social change. (http://www.godlikeproduction.com)

Multiple pseudo-religious organizations have now emerged to address rising socio-cultural and economic problems in society. For instance, churches and religious fellowships now engage in micro credit schemes and financial contributions. The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria established a micro credit finance company, managed by a Board of Trustees

in Yaba, Lagos, 2007 with the mandate to empower interested members of the public, particularly members of the church with loans and credit facilities. Similarly, Islamic interest-free banking and credit schemes have been introduced in some banks and financial institutions controlled by Moslems in Nigeria for the benefit of fellow Muslims. Churches, fellowships and moral reform organizations initiate religious-based educational organizations, build schools and centres for science and research. The Adventist and Living Faith Churches own Babcock and Covenant Universities respectively in Nigeria. Similarly, religious missions own many secondary and primary schools in Nigeria and religion forms the basis for educational curriculum in such institutions. Religious groups and humanitarian societies build hospitals or equip existing ones; they build motherless babies and old peoples' homes. Religious groups have been incorporated into the national HIV/AIDS advocacy and sensitization plan. Religious institutions and leaders are key facilitators in the enlightenment campaigns. The belief is that the charisma of religious leaders and religious indoctrinations will help effect attitude change. Church sessions have been interrupted for health talks, and prominent Bishops and Reverends of the Christendom and the Sultan, the spiritual leader of Muslims in Nigeria, frequently appear on the media for health sensitization campaigns. Religious groups engage in real estate business and transportation services. The catholic mission is one of the largest owners of real estate in Nigeria. More business organizations and humanitarian interests are still cropping up under the canopy of religion. This is understandable because religious identity forms a strong basis for mutual trust and business partnership. People with similar religious backgrounds are more likely succeed as business partners. Nigerians seem to patronize religious based business initiatives with the hope that they will receive a fair deal. Even though many hide under the canopy of religion to swindle, there are still high chances that organizations founded on the basis of religion will run smoothly and successfully. The speculation is that such organizations will adopt high moral principles and that management is likely to be dominated by cleric influence. Public scrutiny is also expected to elicit transparency in management of such organizations.

With this evidence of extended interest in extra-religious enterprises, religion can no longer be dismissed with a wave of hand. The dimensions and areas of interest are chosen to serve practical societal needs, some of which are in areas where government has failed woefully. While the intensions may appear honest, it is not certain whether this is a change of strategy in the expansionist tendency of religion? But even if this was the case, the short-term benefits are worthwhile both from the viewpoint of providers and beneficiaries.

Extended engagements of religious institutions seem to revolutionize tenacious religious practices in unexpected dimensions. Social, services initiated by Christian or Muslim fundamentalist or by African indigenous religious groups cater not only for adherents, but also for the general needs of the masses. This indicates that religion in its contemporary structure, replete with its pseudo forms can, indeed, be a uniting rather than a conflicting, divisive force. The passion with which the people practice religion is transferred into the management of religious-based social organizations. The effect is that such ventures generally achieve a high level of success. Commenting on pseudo-religious organizations in the Christendom, which he refers to as Para Churches, Hadden observes that the success of these organizations is related to the partial autonomy granted by their parent religious bodies to them. Such autonomy, he argues, "allows a much greater degree of flexibility for

innovation than is possible within an established organizational hierarchy" (1). Expansion of interest by religious groups into successful social ventures does not indicate a failure or loss of interest in the traditional role of catering for the spiritual needs of adherents. There rather appears to be a repackaging, which lumps basic religious functions with the pseudo functions. By so doing, religion attempts to reorganize its resources for optimal advantages and for wider productivity. Religion's greatest advantage is having a good hold on the people, who in turn, provide all the other vital resources. It then becomes an issue of showcasing latent potentialities, an issue of publicity. This is where religion explores the existing partnership with the arts and the benefits derivable from the media in communicating its activities.

Religion and Arts: Publicizing a New Social Agenda
It has already been stated that religion and art mutually support each other. Religion is influential and followers help in generating enormous wealth. With influence and wealth, religion can support its pseudo interests. Art helps to showcase religion from its dominant architectural edifices to its wealth, influence, ideologies and expansion programmes. Art is used as an instrument of publicity in generating consciousness towards a new social order.

Religious programmes are publicized using artistic billboards, banners, posters, handbills and other print items. Many religious groups have permanent billboard sites in major cities where they advertise their periodic programmes. Billboard designs are now printed on flexi materials, which can easily be replaced when the need arises, unlike earlier varieties that were painted on site. A significant percentage of jobs handled by large digital printing companies in Nigeria originate from the church. Small-time printers also reap a fortune printing posters and other publicity materials. This boom in patronage of graphic arts and printing by religious groups can be explained in terms of extended interest and the need to advertise them.

Arts and publicity extend into the act of worship in all the religions. In Islam, Koran recital is an oratorical art that is often featured in competitions. Moreover, the motions of prayers follow a specific 'blocking' that must be performed in unison by every participant for the desired decorum and effect. In orthodox Christianity, worship also follows certain patterns of recitals, chants, songs and movements. Perhaps no other religious group engages art in the act of worship more than the Pentecostal Christians. Many intellectual pastors adopt artistic, oratorical and elocutory skills to gain audiences' attention. Paul Adefarasin of the 'House on the Rock' in Lagos, Nigeria stands out for developing a peculiar rhetoric, deliberately stressing the last words of his sentences while preaching. Yet, he does not speak with such emphases in normal conversations. Many other pastors develop the art of speaking in tongues; a language pattern that stresses on sounds, rhythm and rhymes and in most cases does not convey meaning to the ordinary listener.

In terms of performance space, most churches adopt the setting of theatrical performance venues; some adopt the thrust and others the proscenium setting. The altar, representing the stage, is usually designed elaborately for visual emphasis. Other components of performance – music and spectacle, replete with lighting and sound effects are also used to enhance the worship experience. Music has become an indispensable feature in Pentecostal worship. Eskor Toyo, a professor of economics and social critic, while addressing a

congress of academics on mediocrity in aspects of life and governance in Nigeria once remarked. "Their religion has become pop music." 1 This reference obviously was made to (Pentecostal) Christianity where music has become a 'Christian ministry' in its own right. Numerous music ministration groups abound as well as music ministers who flood the music market with countless audio and video productions for a willing and growing audience.

Similarly, drama ministries abound in churches and frequently dramatize Bible stories for live audiences in church. Many drama ministries have metamorphosed from dramatizing Bible stories to creating video films based on professionally written scripts. Helen Ukpabio's Liberty Gospel Church is known for producing popular movies to propagate Christian ideals. This film ministry engages professional Nigerian home video film actors and technicians to ensure good quality delivery. Professional dance groups have also emerged from churches. The Spirit of David (SOD) dance club is an example of such groups that propagate Christianity by ministering through dance. In many churches, dance is a free for all exercise. Worshippers regard dance sessions as opportunities for self-expression and demonstration of freedom in worship. Dancing skills of worshippers may be varied, but church dance seems to be choreographed by an unseen spiritual element that causes everyone to respond ecstatically to a common rhythm.

Religious groups have engaged media arts extensively for religious broadcasting. Electronic communication revolution has played a critical role in religious broadcasting. The effects of electronic communication systems are global, virtually instantaneous, and simultaneously transmitted to a wide audience. Perhaps no group of people was so quick to realize and embrace the potential of electronic communication as evangelical Christians who now seem to dominate the airwaves. The major strategy now adopted by Pentecostal Christians is a massive presence in the nation's mass media. Televangelism, said to be an American creation, (Hadden, Televangelism 2) now assumes a global dimension and has been fully assimilated and explored by Nigeria evangelists. Ihejirika chronicles the interaction between Nigeria Christians and the media, tracing the use of the electronic media for evangelism in Nigeria to 1974 when Bishop Benson Idahosa of the Church of God Mission began television broadcasts on Mid-Western Television. Rev. Ayo Oritsejafor soon followed with the television Programme *Hour of Deliverance* and Pastor W. F. Kumuyi of The Deeper Life Church programmemes. By the 1990s the Nigeria Electronic media was saturated with Christian religious programmemes. Ihejirika expounds:

> There are a hundred and one preachers, healers, counselors, exorcists and singers, belonging to the Christian denominations, who buy airtime on national, local and private radio and televisions to proclaim their fundamentalist message. Some pay for space in newspapers to publish their messages. The most notable figures among them are: Tunde Bakare of the later Day Assembly; Chris Oyakilome of Christ Embassy; Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre; Enoch Adeboye of Redeemded Christian Church of God; Mike Okonkwo of the Redeemed Evangelical Vision; David Oyedepo of the Faith Tabernacle…(4)

A comprehensive exploration of the media by the Christians can best be illustrated by Chris Oyakilome's *Believers' Love World,²* a well packaged programmeme that starts with an introductory montage, followed by promotional jingles on programmemes of the Christ Embassy Church; preaching and adverts of books written by the pastor. The programme finishes with '*Atmosphere for Miracles*', a comprehensive deliverance and healing package for worshipers and viewers. The distribution of this programme to media houses is so wide that there is hardly a media house that does not feature Chris Oyakilome's programmemes in Nigeria. Many religious groups have adopted the multi-media approach in media evangelism, producing and distributing audio and videocassettes and compact discs to members and interested persons. The home video industry has developed to join in the propagation of religious ideologies. Recently, the Internet has been introduced to provide an avenue for interaction and analytical criticisms. Meyer describes this development as the Pentecostalite Public Culture, which she explains consists of a plethora of cultural expressions channeled through different media, many of which resonate with Pentecostal views and morals (www.ASCW.uva.nl).

The relationship between religion, art and the media is towards mediating a course in the social system. The process begins with promoting the existence of a religion and the values in its system; highlighting the contributions of the groups to society and ultimately, establishing control over the social system. Once this happens, religious leadership could contribute to or attempt to control the polity and the state at large. Art is only a tool for realizing a broader game plan. This strategy is perhaps a resuscitation of an earlier technique used by the missions that invaded Africa in the era of the colonialists to build schools, hospital and to provide other social services to lure the local population. The Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist and a number of other missions used the same strategy. The leaders of these Christian religious groups together with Islamic leaders became key figures commenting on and regulating Nigerian polity. Their voices became strong in the advocacy for good governance. The changing political scenario in Nigeria and the compromising stands of some religious leaders in politics may have eroded their influences. The Bishops, Reverends, Sultan, the Imams and the indigenous chiefs have become figureheads who are only influential in their religious domains now. This loss of relevance may have caused the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) with a membership of more than twenty million Nigerians to develop a social agenda:

> To become a force of change not by following the politicians but by winning souls…if we can get at least eighty percent of the people in Nigeria born again, you can be sure a Christian will be the president. You do not even need to spend a kobo to get them; you won't even need to be a rich man before you became president because the people will say you are the one they want and you must be there…(Marshal-Fratani 308)

Ihejirika summarizes that the ultimate aim of this social agenda is the creation of pathways through which the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria can ascend from the fringes to the centre of the national public sphere in order to assume control of the social hegemonic power hitherto monopolized by the state. Every person or group in Nigeria seems to be

aiming at political power and the state machineries for social control. And there is a serious stampede towards the media to publicize positive ideologies. Christians and Muslims use artistic media principally as a propaganda tool thereby establishing a tight bond between religion and the media in the quest for power and control. It is possible that this romance will continue as long as art creates and sharpens publicity channels.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, one cannot overlook the existing issues of contention that must be straightened for continuous co-existence between arts, religion and society. To this effect, parameters must be set as blueprint for effective partnership. Perhaps the greatest contention is the issue of transparency on the part of religion. The questions that crop up frequently are: Is religion sincere in its quest to create social change by establishing relevant institutions or is it interested in seizing power and ultimately establishing control over the state? If religion is sincere, why is it desperate to market itself using the arts and the media, which can add gloss to reality thereby, distorting it? The argument here is that a good product does not need much publicity; it markets itself.

As regards the first question, there is no doubt that the real motive of religion is to take over the world. This motive can be traced to all the religious wars for expansionism and dominance that have been fought across the globe. The jihads, the inquisitions, the crusades and the numerous religious riots in Nigeria were carried out for the same motives, namely to expand or retain territories and to gain followers. The strategies for expansion may have changed following civilization, but the intentions remain. But it is not possible that the world or even Nigeria can adopt only one religion. If only religion will limit its scope to a realizable proportion - to help spiritual development of adherents and to prepare them for eternity. And for the present, to develop structures that could help effect social change for the benefit of the citizenry. If these were done, the second issue would be resolved and religion, replete with its extended interests would be worth publicizing using the arts and the media. Without this realistic approach and greater transparency religious publicity will continue to generate more controversies than solutions.

Notes:

[1]   Professor Toyo was addressing the congress of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), University of Calabar Branch on the 5th of April, 2007.

[2]   The NBC tried to sanction the programme because of unsubstantiated claims of miracle, but media houses revolted because of the overwhelming income received from the programme.

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