

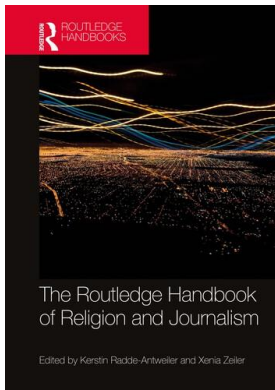
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## 10

# RELIGION AND JOURNALISM IN GHANAIAN NEWS MEDIA

*J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu*

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the intersection between religion and journalism in relation to power and authority in Africa. In Africa, journalism has had to adjust to the new world order of democratic governance, sensitivity to human rights and the emergence of new communication technologies that have speeded up access to information (Bourgault 1995, 206, 207). This chapter focuses on the West African country of Ghana but what we discuss also has wider applicability for other African contexts. We first define the senses and contexts in which the expressions journalism and religion are used. This chapter then discusses the media and religious landscape in Ghana, focusing on how political democratization in this West African country has moved in tandem with new freedoms in the practice of journalism, with all this taking place within a religiously pluralistic context that is dominated by Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity. In the midst of Ghana's religiously pluralistic public space, Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity with its emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit, spiritual power, extensive use of media and high-profile charismatic functionaries has become an important subject for journalistic activities and media reportage. Based on incidents involving two of its most high-profile charismatic leaders, the chapter examines the tensions between religion and journalism in Ghana in relation to religious authority figures. It shows how both religion and journalism have been transformed through mutual engagement as a result of several developments associated with modernity and globalization. These developments include technological change and the innovative uses of media by religious functionaries and their expressions of power and authority.

Journalists take active interest in the activities of charismatic Christianity because the public likes news about such churches and their leaders (Hoover 1988, Mitchell and Marriage 2003, Hoover and Lundby 2006, Meyer and Moors 2006, Morgan 2008). African journalists have found the religious explosion in Africa such as the omnipresence of contemporary Pentecostalism an exciting subject. The movement offers a good case study for interrogating the influence of religion, precisely a certain type of evangelical Christianity, on public life. These case studies involving two well-known African charismatic figures serve to illustrate not just the dynamism of Pentecostalism in Africa but also the robust interest with which the media have approached the phenomenon because of the intersection of power and

authority within the movement. The two Pentecostal/charismatic pastors we discuss here are Pastor Mensa Otabil of the International Central Gospel Church and Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams of the Action Chapel International.

Charismatic graces enhance personal profiles, and in modern Ghana, charismatic pastors, such as Pastor Otabil and Archbishop Duncan-Williams, have become very important and powerful within the public sphere. Their followers in particular have a high regard for them and their authority as people who possess a certain type of charismatic power that makes them influential. Journalists also take interest not just in what such charismatic personalities do inside their churches but also how their behaviors and utterances affect public life because they illustrate the nature of the authority and power that such charismatic figures wield. Journalists also look out for statements from charismatic leaders or personalities that betray either their political leanings or opposition to particular governments. Thus, the charismatic figures in contemporary African/Ghanaian Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity are not only considered mere agents of the supernatural that work in the interest of followers. Sometimes they even, in their sermons and writings, prescribe solutions to national problems. They are also public figures with great influence whose activities and utterances may be scrutinized by journalists in the same way that the actions of political figures are interrogated. In other words, even in preaching, such charismatic personalities are not considered mere mediators of the word of God, but also their sermons are deemed relevant for the wider public sphere whether in politics, economics or morality.

### **Defining journalism, media and religion**

Journalism, as used here, is understood to be a literary activity in which people, acting as both primary and secondary sources of information, document or make oral presentations on the material through various media outlets. In journalism, information is gathered with the view to making facts, figures and viewpoints available to the reading or listening public. The nature of the information and how it is interpreted – that is whether objectively or subjectively – usually depends on the sort of interest that the journalist or author has in the subject matter. What is published also depends on the legal and ethical contexts within which journalists operate. Thus, journalists who are also religious insiders might, for example, use the information to apologetically defend a faith. Religious outsiders may not feel that obliged to be sympathetic to any particular religious course. Whereas secular newspapers may be critical of religious practices, journalism related to church magazines and newsletters often writes with the interests of their institutions and leaders in mind.

Journalists work through journalistic media. The media serve as a kind of midwives to journalism, and the public have the chance to make their own judgments concerning what they read about or listen to. The media in this case includes both the print and electronic forms and then also such new media outlets as the Internet and the use of mobile phones. The world of media has been greatly transformed since the days of the printing press (e.g., Asamoah-Gyadu 2018a). The application of electricity and photography to the processes of communication during the 19th century sparked a revolution in the media landscape that culminated in what were then considered as new technologies including the radio, the telegraph, photography, personal camera, television, wireless and so on. The media revolution has continued unabated, and the sources of information have been digitized to the point where journalistic voices from the remotest parts of the world now have a very fast and wide reach than was previously the case. Computer-mediated communication has evolved as now a major means of practicing journalism, and this is true even in such developing countries

as Ghana. What this means is that a discussion on the intersection between religion and journalism based on studies from one part of the world can no longer be seen as concerning or belonging only to that location. All the stories discussed in this chapter, for example, are available on the Internet, and they are very easily verified through google and other search engines, Facebook and so on (Horsfield 2015, 237–260).

The sort of journalism we deal with in this chapter straddles both the professional and non-professional types because the general public in Ghana likes to talk about religion. The chapter focuses on Pentecostal Christianity, in particular, because it is currently a very dynamic and vibrant stream of Christianity with very high-profile charismatic leaders who are constantly in the news for something they have said, done or even for their wealth. Besides, as compared to their mainline compatriots, the Pentecostals have been quicker to accept the new conditions of a diversified secular and religious marketplace and adapted to those changed conditions by defining new roles for their movements through them (Horsfield 2015, 241–242). Thus, we deal here with journalism in which information about a certain type of Christianity is put in secular public news media through information accessed either by public discourse, social media, popular gossip, rumor, preaching or even writings of the people at the center of events. This focus on religion as a subject of journalism means information and stories about religious activity have become important items in the media. Although the chapter makes references to other religions such as the indigenous religions of Africa, the focus is on Christianity and journalism.

Ghana is a hotbed of religious activities, and it has a very vibrant media as well. Religion intersects with other spheres of life including economics and politics. Relatively speaking, the current intersection of journalism and religion in Ghana occurs within a context of religious liberalism, political democracy and media freedoms and liberties. In most of Africa, the democratization of politics in the early 1990s, after long periods of military dictatorships and apartheid in South Africa, led to the opening up of the media space, as well, and to a large extent freed it from political censure, oppression and vigilantism. Ghana is a typical example of these developments, and religious figures have been prosecuted on account of investigations by journalists. Ghanaian journalism takes a keen interest in religious reporting because traditionally, religion and politics remain inseparable within public spaces. Representations of religion and religious authority in Africa therefore constitute an irresistible topic for journalists in West African countries like Ghana, where religions like Islam and Christianity are mediatized and therefore enjoy an omnipresent stature within the public sphere. The case studies are drawn mainly from the Ghanaian Christian context because in terms of journalistic activity, it is both a hotbed of religion and a classic example of media vibrancy in democratic Africa.

### ***Religion***

In this study, we work with an understanding of religion as the communion between two asymmetrical but intertwined realms of existence – the heavenly and the earthly. The heavenly or transcendent realm is generally invisible but believed to be real. What sets religion apart from the non-religious is the experience of the holy or the sacred. Religion is therefore a mode of communion with an ultimate reality “that is incapable of being subsumed under purely this-worldly, sensory categories” (Sharpe 1997, 61). The earthly realm is associated with the visible and concrete, and the invisible is associated with power symbolizing all those things that make life worth living. The weak, limited and powerless earthly realm relies on the heavenly realm for protection, sustenance, health and vitality. In other words, the earthly realm

stands in need of the powers in the heavenly or supernatural realms. The communion between the two realms takes place through mediated forms of prayer and ritual facilitated by accredited religious functionaries – diviners, pastors, priests, gurus, Muslim clerics and the like.

In the African traditional religious context, for example, indigenous priests, diviners and other religious functionaries are received as representatives of ancestors and deities. They are custodians of religious knowledge of a certain supernatural kind. In that sense, they are supposed to be endowed with the ability to bring communication from that realm for the benefit of the physical realm. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the diviner is called a *Babalawo*, meaning Father of secrets, because of the power of discernment into and engagement with the supernatural realm of existence. The fact that the human realm has to look up to the non-human realm for sustenance and rewards is what gives rise to religious mediation. That ability to engage with the supernatural realm is what gives rise to belief in charismatic personalities. They are thought to understand the proper way to engage in ritual acts that create easy access to the supernatural realm. The religious functionaries we talk about here possess a charismatic personality on account of their perceived closer proximity to the divine realm. They offer powerful prayers and motivate followers through motivational preaching, sometimes even acting as agents of divine well-being for those who patronize them.

The fear expressed in some religious and sociological literature in the middle of the last century, that religion was going to be extinct particularly in the modern West, under the weight of secularization, the enlightenment heritage, modernity and globalization, did not happen. For example, in the middle of the 1990s, Harvard University professor Harvey Cox, who had joined the death of God theologians to predict the demise of religion, revised his stance on seeing the dynamism and vibrancy with which Pentecostalism was transforming religious spaces across the world in terms of growth (Cox 1965, 1995). This revival of Pentecostal religion across Africa, in particular, has occurred alongside the expansion of new media.

### **Pentecostal/charismatic power, media and journalism**

The movements on which we focus here are the Pentecostal/charismatic ministries and churches that have burgeoned across urban Africa since the last three decades of the 20th century. This is the stream of Christianity that the two personalities – Mensa Otabil and Nicholas Duncan-Williams – represent. Emerging from the Christian tradition, the characteristics of Africa's contemporary Pentecostal or charismatic churches are fairly standard: belief in the experience and power of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues; prophesying, seeing visions and revelations; innovative uses of modern media such as televangelism; prosperity preaching and lifestyles; contemporary and media-driven styles of worship; a sense of internationalism and the preaching of motivational messages that speak to the challenges of modern urban living. At the heart of contemporary Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity is the charisma of its leaders. The term *charisma* in this context refers to the extraordinary ability that religious functionaries possess by virtue of their perceived close proximity to the supernatural powers of whose help others stand in need. The possession of charisma signals the attraction of a mass following and numbers that make people influential. Their charismatic personalities and influences make them such important figures not just religiously but also politically and sociologically.

Charismatic religious authorities such as the example we discuss in this chapter are very important in African life today and therefore significant within the public media space. Although Ghana has a particular religio-cultural and socio-political context, the happenings in this specific geo-political space to a large extent are exemplary for the sub-region as a whole. In fact, the extensive use of media by contemporary Pentecostals means that there is a high

level of diffusion of similar religious experiences across cultures. Stories on religion, religious experiences, declarations and scandalous behavior involving its key functionaries is a very high sell when it comes to news reportage. In the end of 2018, for example, Ghana has gone through two key developments that have been explained using religious categories. The first is the democratic elections that have served as opportunities for various religious authorities to predict winners and losers in the media. The second is the death of high-profile music and entertainment stars and politicians. Religious functionaries, particularly styling themselves as Pentecostal prophets, have often claimed to have predicted these unfortunate deaths as a way of legitimizing their place as powerful charismatic authorities (Sackey 2018, 49–62).

The point is that this stream of Christianity, which gained prominence from the late 1970s, is associated with a certain socio-religious mindset that makes it an institution of journalistic interest. Pentecostal/charismatic church leaders covet media attention; their gospel of prosperity message, which features money and material things as prime indicators of divine favor, have led to the emergence of some *nouveau riche* pastors among them (*The Times* 2018). Journalists have great interest in matters of this nature because they are newsworthy and commercially lucrative. That pattern is being repeated in Africa with contemporary charismatic pastors building palatial homes and acquiring personal jets. The charismatic belief in the power of the spoken word as having the potential to bring positive declarations into effect means the motivational messages of the pastors in question gain currency way beyond their regular Sunday audiences. In contemporary Ghanaian Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity, we are dealing with a stream of Christianity that usually foregrounds its discourses on evil in the belief that negative spiritual powers or forces, as they are popularly called in Ghana, are often responsible for Africa's misfortunes.

### **Nicholas Duncan-Williams and the prayer over Ghana's currency**

To exemplify the discourses on the relationships between Pentecostal charismatic authority personalities and journalism in Ghana, it is relevant to investigate the use of journalistic stories surrounding them. The first example is Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, founder and leader of the Action Chapel International in Accra, Ghana. He is not only the pioneering founder of charismatic churches in Ghana, but he has become an influential figure in the country and beyond. His Church, previously the *Christian Action Faith Ministry*, is now simply *Action Chapel International (ACI)*. ACI belongs to the new stream of Pentecostal churches known for their charismatic and media-savvy leadership; urban-centered youthful congregations; dynamic, entertaining and exuberant worship and the preaching of a gospel that upholds material blessings as prime indicators of divine blessing (see, e.g., Gifford 1997, Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). The headquarters of ACI is located on Ghana's Spintex Road, and its Prayer Cathedral was the first mega-size charismatic church building in Ghana. Its seating capacity can be anything between four and five thousand worshippers, and its architecture, in keeping with the flamboyant and supersize theological mindset of contemporary Pentecostal Christianity, is quite elaborate and imposing. Simply put, he is man with much influence.

In February 2014, Archbishop Duncan-Williams was in the news for a public prayer made over Ghana's currency in which he asked for the intervention of the Lord on behalf of the country because its money was losing value at the time. His sympathizers came to his defense when many members of the general public tried to question why an issue that demanded economic answers had to be spiritualized. Journalists reported widely on the prayer for the resuscitation of the ailing Ghanaian cedi that was losing market value. In this situation, the archbishop took on the role as a religious functionary with the ability to intervene in crisis by supernatural means.

Economists called on the government to find practical economic and political solutions to the problem but to the charismatic archbishop, the dwindling fortunes of the cedi was to be explained in terms of supernatural evil forces that did not want Ghana to progress. The way to deal with the problem, as Archbishop Duncan-Williams understood it, was to take authority in the name of Jesus to bind the forces of evil and release the cedi from their grip so that it could find its place on the world market. Using his public prayer over the cedi as basis, I interrogate the interface between contemporary Pentecostalism and journalism in Ghana. In contemporary Pentecostal belief, there is power in the spoken word and this occurs through authoritative declarations. Based on the appreciation of the spoken word as enchanted, I discuss the intersection of religion and public life in Ghanaian journalism.

### ***Cartooning a charismatic prophetic prayer***

On Tuesday February 4, 2014, Ghana's *Daily Graphic*, the oldest and arguably the most important and widely circulating public newspaper in the country, carried an interesting cartoon on prayer for Ghana's currency, the cedi. The *Single Jump* cartoon by artist Zingaro was inspired by the public prayer offered by Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams (Zingaro 2014). In the cartoon, Zingaro depicted a vibrant prayer session involving religious leaders of different persuasions. The different traditions were identifiable by their religious regalia, postures in prayer and symbols of faith. Depicted at the prayer session were an Imam, *okomfo* or traditional priest and then a Christian religious functionary. The Imam wearing the Al Hajj turban also carried the Islamic tasbah (rosary) and the traditional priest in a raffia skirt had a bottle of drink to pour libation. The Christian pastor, who was obviously the focus of the cartoon, was imaged as a pot-bellied bishop wearing a large out-of-proportion cross. There were also non-Christian characters in the cartoon which made the representation look cynical and hilarious. This cynicism was further depicted with the caption from Proverbs 6:6–11 which warns about the effects of laziness. The version used in the cartoon read:

“Go the ant you sluggard, consider its ways and be wise...A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the arms to rest, and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed robber.” (Zingaro 2014)

The judgment here in the choice of Bible quote seemed to be that the prayer over the cedi was relying on supernatural intervention for economic problems to the neglect of practical solutions and hard work. Wearing a purple clerical shirt, the bishop was in the frontline leading the prayer session. He also wore a huge pectoral cross. With both arms outstretched toward heaven and a wide-open mouth – which signifies loud charismatic prayers – the bishop prayed over a Ghana fifty Cedi note spread in front of him. The cartoonist also placed within his work a neutral individual viewing the session from an open window with a question mark over his mind, ostensibly regarding the meaning of what he was witnessing. What is this bishop doing praying over a country's currency? That is the question that presumably the cartoonist had placed on the observer's mind. In the minds of the Ghanaian public, there would have been no doubt about the inspiration behind the cartoon. Thus, the story told by the cartoon was simply a media representation of something that had happened in church on the Sunday prior to the issuance of that newspaper in which it appeared.

The Archbishop's prayer was a public religious event that fascinated even the foreign media, including the *Wall Street Journal*. A report written by Drew Henshaw was titled “In Africa, Calls for Heavenly (Currency) Intervention: Why Has Ghana's Cedi Plunged? Some Look to

the Devil, or Mythical Dwarfs” (Henshaw 2014). A number of articles subsequently appeared in local newspapers within a span of almost a fortnight, and they referred either to the prayer over the cedi or directly discussed it. The prayer over the cedi by a Ghanaian Pentecostal bishop seemed to raise the very important issue of the relationship between the work of the Spirit and the economic order. For example, in an article related to the subject of Pentecostalism and economics, Nimi Wariboko (2013, 141), an ethicist and Pentecostal with some important standing, poses the following basic question: “Is spirit antithetical to economics?” He explores the interplay between spirit and economics, not as argued, but as lived. In what follows, I use what happened in Ghana to further illustrate how the relationship between spirit and economics has been made to flourish within contemporary Pentecostal Christianity in Africa.

### *Spirit and economics*

The charismatic Archbishop Duncan-William embodies the prayer, prophetic and prosperity theology cultures of contemporary African charismatic Christianity. Within such Christianity, there exists a close relationship between spirit and economics. Apart from the regular emphasis on tithes and offerings and the blessings they potentially conjure, almost any contemporary Pentecostal service of this charismatic kind mentions the power of money and its place as a sign of divine breakthrough, favor or blessing. The message is often that the power of the Holy Spirit grants breakthroughs in life, but much prayer is also devoted to destroying the powers of evil that work negatively to bring people, communities and nations to ruin. In the African contexts, these beliefs are continuous with those of witchcraft and in the Christian context with the theology of spiritual warfare against principalities and powers. In the African Christian imagination, evil powers come in all shades and forms – as domestic witches, territorial spirits or as demons on assignment to destroy economic fortunes and bring nations to their knees. That is why mystical forest creatures like dwarfs can be believed to negatively influence everything from marital life to the fortunes of currencies.

The ultimate agenda of the evil powers is believed to inflict poverty and so charismatic prayer often also tries to *bind the spirit of poverty* and to release God’s prosperity on peoples and nations. It is a religious mindset that has everything to do with the belief in mystical causality and the power of the anointed word to deal with the causes of evil whether naturally or supernaturally caused. For example, Archbishop Duncan-Williams appeared on the front page of the *Daily Graphic* on Tuesday October 14, 2014 in connection with the Ebola crisis. According to the newspaper, Archbishop Duncan-William said that the church had declared a two-week fast for “preventive prayers against the Ebola virus from coming into Ghana” (Quaicoe-Duho and Bokpe 2014, 3). He had told the congregation that the “‘demonic Ebola virus’ had Ghana on its radar as its next destination” between October and November 2014 (Quaicoe-Duho and Bokpe, 2014, 3). In this discourse, Duncan-Williams was only following the Nigerian self-declared prophet T. B. Joshua who had preached that Ebola was demonic and subsequently shipped thousands of bottles of holy water to Sierra Leone, to help deal with its effects on people. The narration of Duncan-Williams on Ebola captured by the *Daily Graphic* is as follows:

“I’ve declared another fast on Thursday because on Wednesday, I was resting and at 1:00 am, the Spirit of the Lord woke me up and He said: ‘Are you sleeping?’ And I said: ‘Yes, I am sleeping’, and He said, “Wake up! So I did and He said: ‘You have to go into prayer because the Ebola virus is looking for a door to enter your country between October and November.’” (Quaicoe-Duho and Bokpe, 2014, 3)



As this example shows, there often is a perceived relationship between calamitous situations and the encroachment of evil powers on African public life (e.g., Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, 34). My observation is that, from the Africa side of things, journalists and contributors may write as believers in the workings of evil and so it is virtually impossible in many cases to maintain a critical distance from these implausible developments within such popular Christianity as Pentecostalism.

### ***Interrogating the prayer for the cedi's resurrection***

Archbishop Duncan-Williams usually claims to function within the tradition of Pentecostal/charismatic pastors who possess prophetic power. It is therefore revealing that his public prayer for Ghana's currency occurred at a time when there were ongoing public discussions on the free fall of the cedi against other major currencies. The prayer over the cedi by Archbishop Duncan-Williams ought to be appreciated against the backdrop of the general belief that as a Pentecostal pastor he possessed a certain level of spiritual power with authority over negative situations. Thus, the general tone for prayer in the Pentecostal/charismatic context is to take authority in the name of Jesus to bind the forces of evil, such as the one behind the depreciation of the currency, and then to declare in the name of Jesus Christ, for the powers of good and success, to be released for prosperity. For example, in the same call to prayer against Ebola, Duncan-Williams noted:

“...You can write it down. I don't just say things. I put 38 years of credibility on the line. So if I don't hear, I don't talk. When I say it, you better believe it.” (Quaicoe-Duho and Bokpe 2014, 3)

The public media discussions had brought much pressure on the government of the National Democratic Congress led by John Dramani Mahama, to arrest the decline of Ghana's currency. There were a lot of radio phone-in programs around the time of the prayer over the declining cedi, in February 2014. The phone-in calls were presumably led by those sympathetic to the opposition New Patriotic Party, who called for the resignation of the then finance minister, Seth Tekper, claiming he failed on the job by supervising the decline of the Ghanaian currency. While some – including members of the then ruling NDC government – blamed the problem on global economic downturns, the opposition parties in Ghana seized the opportunity to chastise the government for its poor record of economic management. In the midst of the rational economic and social scientific arguments, one leading government functionary joined the religious reasons band and blamed supernatural forces citing the work of dwarfs for the decline of the cedi against other major foreign currencies (Henshaw 2014). In his prayer for the Cedi on February 2, 2014, Archbishop Duncan-Williams asked for God's intervention through the power of the Holy Spirit. In a specific part of the prayer, he commanded the cedi to rise, because in this form of Christianity prayer must be authoritative and not supplicatory. In typical charismatic fashion, the prayer was declarative and interactive. In other words, Archbishop Duncan-Williams led the church to make declarations after him, commanding the cedi to halt its free fall and rise:

Say, “I lift up my money right now, and I command the cedi...” Say, “I, I hold this money in my hand right now, the cedi.” Say, “I hold up the cedi; I hold it up.” Say, “I hold up the cedi with prayer! And I command the cedi to recover! And I declare the cedi will not fall. It will not fall; it will not fall any further. It goes up. I command the cedi to climb.”

Say, "I command the resurrection of the cedi in the name of Jesus." Say, "I command a miracle for the economy. I command and release a miracle for Ghana's economy in the name of Jesus!" Say, "Satan, take your hands off the President! Take your hands off the Central Bank and the Finance Minister."

Say, "We release innovation for the President, my God, the Governor of Bank of Ghana, Central Bank, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Finance Minister." Say, "We command new ideas, breakthroughs, and a miracle for the economy. Let the cedi rise. In Jesus' name. Amen." (Peacefmonline 2014)

The prayer thus commanded Satan and other demonic powers to loosen their influence on the currency and release the minds of political decision-makers so they can function productively. This public prayer, command or declaration for the rise or resurrection of the cedi must also be understood within the belief in the power of the spoken word in Pentecostal/charismatic religious practice. In the face of public opprobrium against his action in the days that followed, Duncan-Williams took to the media again to defend his actions. In a separate interview with the *Daily Graphic*, Archbishop Duncan-Williams noted among others:

"We all know the implications of the falling currency... the prices of petrol, food, transport fares, all go up. My concern is for the ordinary Ghanaian who has to face the consequences. I don't see anything wrong in praying for the nation and the economy of my country.... If we can ask for prayers for the nation's peace, peaceful elections, to avert flood...why can't we pray for our economy and our leaders?" (Bokpe 2014, 23)

Archbishop Duncan-Williams in further defense of his actions invoked his prophetic ability stating that in 2014, Ghana may go through crises because it was a "seventh year" and the famine in the time of Joseph in the Old Testament lasted for seven years (Bokpe 2014, 3). When the sound bites of the Duncan-Williams prayer were played back in the media, it was obvious that members of the ACI were with their leader in his worldview that the fall of the cedi was supernaturally caused as they responded with Amens, Hallelujas and "in the name of Jesus" (Peacefmonline 2014). Africa has a strong tradition of belief in the power of words, especially blessings and curses. There are forms of words, note, that are not mere statements but contain an action that may be called "performative utterances" (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 38). In other words, African Christian new religious movements whose primary media of reference is the Bible also believe in the powers of oral blessings and curses, just as African traditional religions.

### **Pastor Mensa Otabil: religion, journalism and Machiavellian politics**

The second case study is based on the media presence of Pastor Mensa Otabil of the *International Central Gospel Church* (ICGC). Like ACI, the ICGC is also a mega-size contemporary Pentecostal church that attracts up to 10,000 worshipers to its two Sunday Services. Mensa Otabil is a popular television preacher and so, like Archbishop Duncan-Williams, issues concerning him have great journalistic appeal. Pastor Otabil established ICGC in 1984 and has over the years managed to form branches throughout Ghana and beyond. He is a gifted motivational preacher who emphasizes black empowerment. Pastor Otabil uses the Bible to challenge hearers not to rely on government but to take their destiny into their own hands if they want to succeed in life. Apart from his mega-size virtual middle-class congregation, the other most important evidence of his success is the establishment of the Central University (CU)

in the late 1990s. In a little over a decade, CU has grown to become the single largest private university in Ghana. Additionally, Pastor Otabil has a national appeal because of his weekly television programs like *Living Word* (Ghana Television and TV 3) through which he addresses some of the basic challenges confronting particularly educated young people seeking to make something out of their lives and looking for the right motivation to do so.

It is therefore not too difficult to understand why Pastor Otabil can preach messages that challenge Africans looking for free things all the time to change their mindset. For example, Pastor Otabil preaches that those who want money must understand that God does not give money. Africans who want to have a good life, he says, ought to work hard and invest their funds to be able to buy the things they want in life. He preaches sermons on black pride in order to disabuse African minds that they are inferior to the white race (Gifford 2004, 113, 120). Pastor Otabil is a very popular preacher in Africa so it is understandable why a political party would like to use his voice and message to run its electioneering campaigns. In using his voice in political campaigning, a Christian preacher who is supposed to be non-partisan was deliberately made to speak to partisan interests through the use of his media messages without his approval or consent (Otabil 2012). More recently, Pastor Mensa Otabil has been in the news for various reasons. For example, he set up a savings and loans company that later became incorporated as a bank. At the end of 2018, the government suddenly announced that the Capital Bank in which Pastor Otabil, his ICGC and some of its leading members had significant shares, had gone bankrupt. The government took it over and the failure of the bank generated journalistic interest (Hawkson 2018, 3). A number of people posted articles on the Internet and Ghana's newspapers, on why Pastor Otabil who focuses his television preaching ministry of prosperity through making wise choices in investments, was unable to apply his principles to save the bank (Adombila 2018, 60). He responded by saying that he was not involved in the day-to-day operations of the bank and that he remained quiet so that the legal process could take its course (Adombila 2018, 3). This matter of Pastor Otabil and the failed capital bank became a matter of political and therefore journalistic interest. Additionally, when his sermons were used to buttress a political party, this brought in legal matters regarding copyright and defamation through the use of journalistic media. The reporting led to a public clash between Pastor Mensa Otabil of ICGC and political functionaries and members of the public who were sympathetic to then ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) of the Republic of Ghana in the run-up to the December 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

The topic borders on emerging issues relating to the presence of charismatic Christianity in Africa, the appropriation of its very popular piety within various social institutions including politics and the potential conflicts that may arise as a result of the intersections of these issues within the Ghanaian public sphere. The media discussions on the events and the responses of the various parties involved in this drama was a demonstration of how important contemporary Pentecostalism had become in the politics of democratic Ghana, and therefore, matters of journalistic interest. Pastor Otabil had to be an important public figure for his sermons to be used in such a way and in that sense, he represents the political significance of contemporary Pentecostal leaders in Ghanaian public and political life. Paul Gifford (2004, 118) singles out Ghana's Pastor Otabil for commendation among Africa's charismatic pastors for his very practical sermons and rightly refers to the fact that Pastor Otabil is considered to have a broader horizon than most of Ghana's charismatic preachers. The Ghanaian public often takes interest on what particular pastors, such as Mensa Otabil, say in their preaching about particular political events. It is very easy then for a particular pastor, especially the powerful ones with mega size congregations and enormous media

presence, to be suspected of throwing their religious weight behind a specific political party. There are clearly new twists and turns in the relationship between Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity and democracy in Ghana fueled by an intense media interest in religion and its consequent discussions and speculations around charismatic personalities and the way they use their power and authority in preaching on matters of public interest.

The NDC used bits and pieces of Mensa Otabil's previous messages that had been published in electronic forms for their political campaign. This is itself not new because the lyrics of Gospel-life music either in their original form or with appropriate insertions constitutes some of the most-lively political songs used in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. Much of the material, as it later became evident, had been taken out of its original context bringing into play issues relating to copyright and defamation because even when Pastor Otabil protested, the use of his voice for partisan political purposes continued. Pastor Mensa Otabil in his response to what he considered an illegal use of his voice and aspects of his sermons to gain partisan political advantage went as far as to implicate the then President, John Dramani Mahama, in the matter. In November 2012, Pastor Mensa Otabil had to call a press conference to literally chastise the ruling government led by President Mahama. This was because the government of President Mahama, which was seeking re-election at the time, had used his voice to support the campaign message of the ruling NDC that a free senior high school policy being promised by the then opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) was not a feasible proposition in a fledgling economy like that of Ghana (The Statesman 2012).

### ***Using Otabil's voice in a political game***

In the run up to Ghana's 2012 elections, the opposition NPP set the agenda for the campaign by promising free senior high school education for all Ghanaians. Against the backdrop of an unproven belief on the part of the ruling NDC that Pastor Otabil favored the opposition NPP, a surrogate NDC group, Education Watch, pulled up certain sermons of Otabil in which he is heard warning against the dangers of free things and which mentions free education in particular. There can never be free education as long as we pay taxes, Otabil was heard to say on the tapes played on most radio stations in Ghana. The NDC was literally taking Otabil's name in vain by making him say things in their favor regardless of the context of the message. Even more seriously, it turned out that the original messages had been doctored with Otabil's voice from different tapes joined to make it sound as if these were fresh messages preached to indicate his support for the opposition NDC. In other words, politicians used the message of a popular and important charismatic pastor to support their cause by taking his message out of context and making it sound as if he was commenting on a present campaign issue on the side of one of the competitors.

Mensa Otabil reacted through a press conference in which he described the NDC tactics among others as Machiavellian and an infringement on his rights. Subsequently he went on to preach a whole sermon titled "Your Vote" (Asamoah-Gyadu 2018b, 83–95). The sermon literally consumed the attention of the major political parties on how it affects their fortunes in the minds of those who admire Pastor Otabil's bold, inspiring, practical and motivational sermons. Even without the press conference, it was obvious that to make a Christian sermon say what it was not intended to say, during a political campaign issue, was unfair to the preacher. For those who did not know that the messages were not new, Otabil's image suffered greatly. By the time he came out to publicly denounce the use of his name for party political interests through campaigning, much damage had been done to his reputation. Pastor Mensa Otabil had been verbally assaulted by members of the opposition through both

the print and electronic media. One NDC sympathizer described him as worse than Nebuchadnezzar following his rebuttal of the party's approach to politics using religion and, in the process, breaching his rights.

"NDC is Evil" was the caption of the story in which *The Daily Guide* newspaper reported the presence conference called by Pastor Otabil to respond to the use of sound bites from his sermons in a political game (Owusu and Anaman-Agbodo 2012). The *Daily Guide* is an anti-NDC paper and since the NDC as an institution was suspected to be behind the advertisements featuring Otabil's voice although Otabil never called NDC by name during the press conference, it served the newspapers purposes to introduce the direct confrontation element into the discussion. This is how *Daily Guide* reported the matter in part:

"Pastor Mensa Anamua Otabil, General Overseer of the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), yesterday bared his teeth at what he described as attempts by political parties, especially some functionaries of the ruling National Democratic Congress, to drag him into partisan politics for their parochial interests." (Owusu and Anaman-Agbodo 2012, 3)

The punch line in Pastor Otabil's press statement is when he described what the NDC surrogate group had done in the following words:

"This is defamatory. This is unethical. This is criminal. This is malicious. This is Machiavellian. This is evil. It is a violation of my person and my integrity." (Owusu and Anaman-Agbodo 2012, 3)

Machiavelli (1469–1527) was an Italian statesman and political philosopher who took the position that the acquisition and effective use of power may necessitate the deployment of unethical methods. To suggest that the NDC tactics were Machiavellian was therefore to suggest that they were using unscrupulous methods in their politics. There were three different sound bites that were used from various sermons preached by Otabil. The press conference took place after the third one had been used, and Otabil explained that the third one, in particular, consisted of different statements from his sermons, some of them preached almost a decade ago. They had been stringed together to make them seem current and this amounted to journalistic manipulation of information.

At the press conference, Pastor Otabil did not restrain his ill-feelings toward those who were taking his name in vain: "[It was after listening to the third tape that] I realized that I was dealing with a marauding and bullying force that was bent on impugning my name and integrity without shame" (Owusu and Anaman-Agbodo 2012, 3). Certain that the ruling NDC government knew about the use of his voice in political campaigning, Mensa Otabil appealed directly for the intervention of the President, John Dramani Mahama to call his people to order:

"I kindly call on the President to rise and speak upon this issue." "With all due respect sir," Mensa Otabil addressed the President directly: "although you may not be aware of these developments, the perpetrators of these blatant acts of impunity are largely affiliates and surrogates of your party." He also described the tactic as immoral: "When political operatives sample, splice and edit a pastor's words to mean something other than what was intended, and then go ahead to lift those words from their proper context and place them within a partisan context...that is immoral." (Owusu and Anaman-Agbodo 2012, 3)

It was mischievous for political operatives, Otabil continued, to hijack a pastor's words, manipulate them to build partisan jingles and play them on party information vans across the country. In our technological age, the fine distinction that we make between electronic and print media has become nebulous because most newspapers can also be downloaded from the Internet.

### **Conclusion: religion, journalism and the future in Africa**

An important characteristic of contemporary Pentecostalism, as I have noted, is their innovative and extensive use of media. With the explosion in numbers that the Pentecostal movement has attracted, it is natural for journalists to take interest not simply in their religious activities but also in how the issues of power and authority intersect in the work of their leaders. It is quite easy to have access not just to sermons but also to live worship services through the Internet and other media. The issues emerging out of the developments we have discussed from the Ghanaian context show that what happens within the confines of a church, such as the preaching of sermons, could now serve as important and critical source of information also for journalism on religion in Africa.

African Pentecostalism is now taken seriously as a subject for journalistic reportage. David Martin has argued that certain characteristics of Evangelical Christianity generally and Pentecostalism, in particular, has bearings upon the character of any political presence (Martin 1999, 39). Pentecostalism belongs to this broader Evangelical Christian tradition of which Martin speaks here. The churches that constitute the Pentecostal fraternity have virtually become the representative face of Christianity in Africa and their charismatic leaders wield much authority and power both on their followers and admirers. What this means is that through religious journalism, for example, the media could provide an important critique of religious expression, especially regarding how certain religious functionaries exercise power and influence within the public sphere.

In much of Africa, the fact that Pentecostal/charismatic leaders have acquired influential voices within public space is a fact that is taken for granted. This shows, for example, in the way that Archbishop Duncan-Williams' prayer for the revival of the fortunes of Ghana's currency went viral and generated much interest among journalists interested in religious reportage. The impact of charismatic pastors is also a result of their use of media and of the interest that journalists have for their work. Another issue which the case studies exemplified is the issue of copyright in journalistic reporting in Ghana. As the case of Pastor Otabil demonstrated, it is against the right of a person for his or her published work to be used without permission if it had been previously registered. However, charismatic pastors use the media for church services. They also distribute their sermons widely on portable recording devices for sale. Sermons stream live on the Internet and are subsequently published as books. The books may be covered by copyright, but the electronic forms are usually not and so are repeated on other platforms without fear of being sued for infringements.

These aspects highlight some critical issues on the relationship between religion and journalism because when information is put voluntarily in the media for evangelistic purposes, interesting dynamics between how journalists may or may not use such information arise. The issue of defamation arose with regard to the manner in which parts of Pastor Otabil's sermons were allegedly pieced together by the NDC and used for purposes intended to portray him as supportive of the cause of a political party. This resulted in Pastor Otabil's messages being given a twist that his pulpit had been used for partisan politics which is a situation he never intended to use his messages for.

What these case studies and the journalistic interests they generated showed is furthermore that, in the study of the interface between religion and media, attention ought to be given not just to the ways in which Pentecostalism uses media but also to the manner in which Pentecostalism as such generates exciting stories which journalists want to take up. The activities of charismatic pastors even affect the political order. The presence of the Pentecostal/charismatic fraternity in World Christianity is felt partly through the large numbers of people who may vote for candidates vying for political power and who may be sympathetic to their viewpoint. Ellis and ter Haar (2004, 95) noted that in Africa, one important reason why new religious movements like the Pentecostals are popular is because they promise original solutions for contemporary problems. They argued that due to the weakness of civil society groups and the reverential approach that African take toward religious leaders, Africa's new religious movements constitute attempts to revive known sources of power (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 100). The leaders of the movements are so powerful that in Ghana, for example, anything said or done by leading religious figures such as the Archbishop Duncan-Williams and Pastor Mensa Otabil has become important to the public, to political power brokers and therefore to journalists. In the words of Ellis and ter Haar:

“The rather sudden and radical political changes in Africa in the 1990s encouraged the irruption of spiritual movements [like the Pentecostals] into political space as people sought alternative sources of authority...” (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 100)

In the study of religion and journalism and how that relationship relates to the deployment of authority and power, the interest that the media exercises in the ministries and utterances of leaders like Otabil and Duncan-William illustrates their importance as alternative sources of power besides the political order. Beyond satisfying the curiosity of the public, the reporting on these two personalities and several others serve as a window of appreciation on the significance of religion on African public life. The use of represents/misrepresents is important because the way a particular religious leader's activities are captured is dependent upon the leanings of the newspaper, television or radio station and Internet websites.

### Further readings

Bourgault, L. M., 1995. *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

This is a historical account of religion and media in West Africa and it is very useful for understanding the intersection between religion and journalism in the sub region.

Gifford, P., 2004. *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

This is a book with extensive descriptions of African (Ghanaian) contemporary Pentecostalism. Much of the ethnographic data has been sourced from the media.

Hackett, R. I. J. and Soares, B. F., eds., 2015. *New Media and Religious Transformation in Africa*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

The book has useful essays on religion and media covering both print and electronic media but focusing in particular on new media including the Internet.

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