

Chapter 22

The Concept of Power in the Nigerian Religious Discourse: A Study of Advertising Copies by Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria-based Christian bodies have over the years politically acclimatized, secularizing and commoditizing their activities and discourse. This is reflected in their communications which most often tap into controversial sources such as politics and power. In effect, the two phenomena of politics and power today represent dominant themes and forms of baits in religious persuasive communications. A case in point is the Christian advertising discourse that, in many complex ways, often deploys the concept of power, sometimes with political undertones. Using semiotics and the content analysis of a corpus of over 500 advertising copies generated by 50 different charismatic churches based in four South-Eastern Nigerian cities, this chapter critically examines the various ways in which the concept of (socio-political) power is used in advertising messages designed by Nigerian Christian organizations. The study also examines how this concept of power is used outside the spiritual realm in a bid to promise various forms of political and economic prosperity to gullible Nigerian masses.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria-based Christian denominations have proffered and propagated various – and sometimes varying – narratives that translate their liturgies or doctrines. Roughly speaking, these narratives have principally revolved around the (divine) role they (*must*) play in engineering the general wellbeing of mankind. Whether enunciated by historic churches or neo-Pentecostal vitalities, these narratives or messages have

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mostly been anchored in repentance, peace, freedom, salvation, healing, miracles and multifaceted prosperity among other ideals. In tandem with this, Nigeria-based Christian churches have been “spiritually programmed” to preach repentance from sin and advocate peace as the main solution to war. Through their sensational and/or craftily coined preaching, their sermons and Episcopal/sacral communications, they have sought the freedom of mankind from sin and suffering as well as man’s salvation from what is often called “spiritual death” or “second death”. The most popular and uncontroversial aspects of these churches’ messages have been apolitical. This observation is not unconnected to the fact that an aphorism – or rather highly problematized axiom – stipulates that politics and governance are no go zones for the clergy. A similar and somehow complementary “dictum” claims that politics and religion are – and will always be – incompatible. The two variables (politics and religion) are in some sense, cat and dog. In line with the two aforementioned “wisdoms”, popular imaginations will expect the clergy or “men of God” to essentially stay out of politics and to totally avoid such a variable (politics) in their rhetoric and agendas. No doubt, Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe once posited that once the bishops and other men of God “turn political, we [politicians] regard them as no longer spiritual entities and this is quite a dangerous path they have chosen for themselves” (cited in *Suite 101*, 2007).

However, it has remained pertinent to explore how feasible or possible the two above mentioned aphorisms can be. Rev Nyasako Ni Nku (the former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon) plainly questions this anti-politics axiom when he remarks that “you cannot preach without condemning what is wrong [...] especially when what is wrong is being perpetrated by the people in authority” (quoted in Endong 2014, p.20). This could mean that political criticism or the politicization of Christian communication may be a laudable accident or one of the unavoidable consequences of the act of being loyal to the salvific or messianic mission of the Church.

While viewed as an accident by some observers, the act of exploring/taping into politics and power is regarded as an obligation by a good number of Black African clergymen, church ideologues and theologians. In an apparent humanistic way, the latter sets of church thinkers see this as an avenue to “redress” or contribute to the redressing of the political apparatus of the country. They see involvement in politics or the act of being politically committed as an avenue to ultimately secure a better governance. In their thinking, such a political task or commitment can only be heroic and definitely beneficial to the whole populace. This inclination towards liberation theology has often been visible or manifest in tendencies by clergymen to use the pulpit in order to endorse particular politicians or government officials in whom they believe.

In countries like Nigeria, it has even become fashionable for “men of God”, irrespective of spiritual orientations, to “flock with the big politicians”, especially in contexts where the two parties have compatible interests (Akpogena, 2012; Ihejirika 2011). Still in Nigeria, religious leaders do not see themselves exclusively as spiritual pathfinders, but as God-sent machineries that can operate miracles from the political realm to other sensitive spheres of the society. In tandem with this, churches (particularly the charismatic ones), have assumed greater missions which go beyond mere spiritual nurturing of the populace to engulf the vision of affecting the political architecture of the country. Many of them view themselves not just as spiritual pathfinders and facilitators but equally as cardinal partners of government in the socio-political development of the country. Some even consider themselves as constituting a heavy spiritual force having serious political potential and being empowered to partially drive the political campaign/efforts of crafty candidates, ahead of elections. Additionally, many of these churches arguably claim to be divinely empowered to guide their members and the entire nation not only towards national unity, peace and material prosperity but equally towards sociopolitical growth. In line with this,

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