ALTAR MEDIA’S *LIVING WORD*: TELEVISED CHARISMATIC CHRISTIANITY IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

In many parts of Africa, charismatic-Pentecostal churches are increasingly and effectively making use of mass media and entering the public sphere. This article presents a case study of a popular charismatic church in Ghana and its media ministry. Building on the notion of charisma as intrinsically linking religion and media, the aim is to examine the dynamics between the supposedly fluid nature of charisma and the creation of religious subjects through a fixed format. The process of making, broadcasting and watching *Living Word* shows how the format of televisualisation of religious practice creates charisma, informs ways of perception, and produces new kinds of religious subjectivity and spiritual experience. Through the mass mediation of religion a new religious format emerges, which, although originating from the charismatic-Pentecostal churches, spreads far beyond and is widely appropriated as a style of worship and of being religious.

Introduction

‘It’s a new day! And it’s time for transformation. Destiny Summit 2002. It’s time to discover your destiny and change your paradigm from the old to the new, as you receive inspiration for transformation at the Destiny Summit 2002 by the International Central Gospel Church.’ Accra, November 2002, Sunday evening six o’clock. The weekly *Living Word* broadcast on TV3 starts with an advertisement for a church ‘product’: a seven-day-long religious conference ‘full of life-transforming ministry’, which will begin the next day. An excited female voice urges the TV viewers at home to attend the sessions in order to be able to change from ‘the old’, which is represented by an old-fashioned typewriter, to ‘the new’, represented by a computer. The advertisement beautifully illustrates not only the marketing techniques the ICGC employs, but also the vision behind its plurifold media ministry: to use modern media technologies to radically transform Ghanaian people with the message
of Christ and not to remain stuck in an archaic idea of religion as separate from ‘the world’.

The International Central Gospel Church is one of the most popular and fastest growing charismatic Christian churches in Ghana today. Its weekly TV programme *Living Word* is watched by millions and the radio version penetrates different corners of Ghanaian society through various FM stations. Its founder and leader, Rev. Dr Mensa Otabil, ranks high among the nation’s most popular personalities. Since 1992, when the liberalisation of the Ghanaian media sector enabled religious leaders to buy airtime with a fast growing number of FM radio stations and the new private TV channels, Christian churches, and especially the charismatic and Pentecostal ones, have become abundantly present in the Ghanaian media. Religious programming takes up a large percentage of airtime on most of the FM radio stations and at weekends a series of church services and sermons fills five hours of television time.

Although the mediation of religion in itself is nothing new, the relation between religion and mass media is only now being developed as a specific field of scholarly interest (e.g. De Vries and Weber 2001; Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Hackett 1998; Hoover and Lundby 1997; McLagan forthcoming; Meyer forthcoming; Stout and Buddenbaum 1996). Various forms of mass mediation of religion all over the globe challenge the hitherto widely held assumption that with the global spread of ‘modernity’ societies would become more and more differentiated and religion would retreat into its own domain of ‘the sacred’ and ‘the private’ (Clark and Hoover 1997). Religious movements’ effective appropriation of modern media technologies to manifest themselves in the public sphere and spread their message raises the question of how mass mediation transforms religious practice. Classic discussions of mass media and the public sphere (Habermas 1989) and of the relation between Protestant religion and capitalist modernity (Weber 1974 [1930]) are embedded within a modernist discourse that emphasises rationality and leaves no room for the passions, desires, emotions and ‘magic’ that are also part of modernity. Charismatic Christianity grants a prominent place to ‘the experience of the working of the Holy Spirit and the practice of spiritual gifts’ (Anderson 2001:4) and it is precisely this type of religion that attracts so many Africans today and has gained such a dominant grip on the Ghanaian public sphere. This calls us to acknowledge the mystical and experiential dimension of the modern public sphere and to ask how mass media make possible new ways of expressing religious passions and experiencing spirituality.

Instead of driving religion and technology apart into separate spheres
of ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’, I want to start from the intrinsic relationship between them (cf. De Vries 2001). The interface between the technological and the religious can be captured by the notion of ‘charisma’, denoting the gift of authority, the power to capture people’s attention, to evoke devotion, to make believe, to captivate and to enchant. Media technologies like television and film can make things and persons more beautiful and attractive than they really are, while at the same time presenting them as true and accessible. They give them a mystical kind of authority that makes people desire or follow them. Modern Ghanaian pastors have and cultivate this kind of charisma. It characterises the leadership style of their churches and the personality cults around them. ‘Charisma’ is also a central theological notion in charismatic Christianity, referring to the belief in the gifts of the Holy Spirit (‘charismata’), like healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy and miracles. In both the leadership and the theological sense, charisma belongs to the realm of the supernatural, the mystical.

Max Weber built his theory of charisma (1978) on a long tradition of theological thinking about the difference between the institutionalised and the spiritual aspects of Christianity (Fabian 1971:4). He described charisma as a type of authority based not on traditional, inherited power, nor on rational-bureaucratic power, but on a special grace, a supernatural gift of power, or, more precisely, on the perception of such gifts among the followers of a charismatic leader. From Weber’s logical opposition of the flowing, spontaneous character of charisma and fixed, institutionalised forms of authority and behaviour, one could conclude that non-spontaneous, ritualised behaviour would destroy or at least counteract charisma. Yet, in his study of the charismatic Jamaa movement, Fabian rejects this view and speaks of the routinisation of charisma (Fabian 1971:181). In Ghanaian charismatic Christianity, too, there is a constant tension between free and spontaneous spiritual experience and the disciplinary, institutionalised ‘format’ that moulds people into ‘good Christians’. This article focuses on this dynamic between the supposedly fluid nature of charisma and the process of subjectivisation through a fixed format. It shows how the format of televisualisation of religious practice creates charisma, informs ways of perception and produces new kinds of religious subjectivity.

‘Mediation’ is inherent in religion itself. A ‘medium’, whether a technological medium or a religious/spiritual medium, creates a connection between the present and the absent, or between the visibly present and the invisibly present, between the physical and the spiritual. At the core of every religion is a certain kind of mediation between, first, the physical
and the spiritual world, and, second, the individual person and the religious community. Even though charismatic doctrine defies mediation and claims direct, personal access to the spiritual, religious practice creates such links through persons, objects, practices, images, sounds, or usually a combination of them. The question then becomes how the technological mediation of religion alters religious processes of giving meaning and generating belonging and informs the relation between a person and God or the Holy Spirit, between the community of believers and the spiritual realm, and between the individual believers in the community. In charismatic Christian practice, it is mass gatherings and publicity that produce communal, spiritual experiences. The presence, movements and sounds of a large crowd invoke the Holy Spirit in a place and make people experience a ‘touch’ of the Spirit. The creation of a personal relation with Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit happens very much through the spontaneous dynamics of crowds at large public gatherings. At the same time, religious events are characterised by the performance of learned behaviour according to a fixed pattern of arranged and timed practices, a format that is necessary not only to maintain discipline but also to achieve the kind of spiritual experience aimed at in such events. What happens to this relation between spirituality and on the one hand publicity and mass dynamics and on the other hand format and discipline when it is further publicised by modern media technologies? How does TV mediation relate to the physical nature of spiritual mediation in religious practice? In other words, what is the relation between the kind of communication going on during the live performance of a church service and the communication through a TV screen?

By describing the whole process of making, broadcasting and watching Living Word, I show how Otabil focuses more on the message than do other TV pastors. The format of his programme also succeeds in mediating charisma and creating a spiritual experience of the workings of the Holy Spirit for the audience. As Otabil and many other charismatic pastors, like Korankye Ankrah of the International Bible Worship Centre or Nicholas Duncan-Williams of the Christian Action Faith Ministries, broadcast their worship services on television, not only is their message spread beyond the churches to a much larger audience, but also a certain way of behaving and of relating to this message is made visually available to a mass audience. What emerges is a religious ‘format’, a more or less fixed pattern of practices, behaviour, utterances, dress and body language, which is associated mainly with the charismatic churches, but spreads almost independently of religious
doctrine and is widely appropriated. The creation of religious subjects outside the church by the televisualisation of church members’ emotions and reactions to the sermon widens the notion of ‘religious community’ to include different ‘audiences’ and urges us to take into account the relations between the church audience, the edited audience seen on television, and the television audience, and the type of ‘format’ these different audiences relate to.

Religion on the Ghanaian Airwaves

Until 1992, the media in Ghana had been largely controlled by the state. After independence, in the euphoria of freedom and national pride and progress, radio, which had come to the Gold Coast in 1935 and reached widely into the rural areas, was viewed optimistically as the means for political reform. Inheriting from the colonial government the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and with it a specific media ideology, the state employed radio, and from 1965 also TV, for the purpose of national education, integration and development. In line with Nkrumah’s nationalist discourse and anti-colonial critique, media production focused on the promotion of national culture to instil people’s pride in the ‘African Heritage’ (cf. Meyer 1999b). At the same time, from the late 1970s to 1982 GBC-TV broadcast tapes of the American televangelist Oral Roberts. In a period of severe economic crisis, this programme and the American evangelical books and tapes that started circulating around the same time brought a new message of prosperity and personal success, and boosted the new wave of charismatic Christian enthusiasm in Ghana (cf. Larbi 2001:297). The message of this new strand of Christianity, however, did not go well with the ideals of former president Rawlings’s cultural revolution and after he took power for the second time in December 1981 the neo-traditional Afrika Mission, as the religious branch of the revolution, was the only religious group granted airspace on state radio (Gyanfosu 2002; Schirripa 2000).

After the turn to democratic rule in 1992, the Ghanaian state loosened control over the media, thus giving way to a rapidly evolving private media scene. At present, there are about forty local newspapers, twenty magazines/tabloids, over thirty FM and two shortwave radio stations, one public and five private TV stations, a number of cable television providers, a booming video industry (Meyer 1999b), and growing access to the Internet. With the shift of media production from a state monopoly to a private practice of many small producers, there has also been a
(partial) shift in the purpose of media use from education and enlightenment to entertainment and commerce. Indeed, the most significant feature of the new radio and TV stations is their commercial nature: airtime has become profitable. As a result, the airwaves tend to be dominated by the voices of those who have money and those who are able to attract sponsors, to the exclusion of those who enjoy less popularity and financial resources. But contrary to the concerns of freedom and plurality of professional media practitioners and institutions, who appropriate a modernist discourse of civil society and implicitly assume that religion has no place in a democratic public sphere (Ansu-Kyeremeh and Karikari 1998; Karikari 1994), the religious influence on independent broadcasting is enormous.

Although legally every radio and TV station must have a secular base, in practice it is the charismatic and Pentecostal churches who have the resources to develop their own programmes, pay for airtime and dominate the airwaves. Moreover, many of the new private FM radio stations are owned by born-again Christians and this greatly influences the programming. As Rev. Cephas Amartey of JoyFM said, ‘churches are keeping the radio stations in business, paying for interviews, adverts, airtime etc. This means a significant contribution to national development. Religious broadcast has become the bedrock of the media industry in the country’. Many radio stations also have pastors or evangelists employed as part-time presenters, DJs, and talk-show hosts, independent of their particular church, but by far the majority belong to the charismatic and Pentecostal ones. People like Rev. Kofi Okyere, Rev. Cephas Amartey and Rev. Owusu-Ansah of JoyFM have become popular media personalities, are interviewed for entertainment magazines, present gospel shows, and are hired by various churches to host or perform on special occasions.

Churches’ extensive use of mass media has generated a religious, charismatic-Pentecostally oriented public sphere (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2001; Meyer forthcoming), which is characterised by the intertwining of religion with both national and global politics and the field of commerce and entertainment. In a situation of growing economic hardship and growing scepticism about the capability of the state to cater for people’s needs, it is religious leaders who talk about nationhood and mobilise their followers to support the nation of Ghana. In their commitment to national development, religious leaders at the same time transcend the nation and enter a global public sphere to engage with both religious and secular transnational movements and make claim to discourses of democracy, human rights, black emancipation and
women’s emancipation (cf. Englund 2000). What emerges is a public sphere in which religious and political discourse flow into each other, a sphere characterised by a pluralism of moral ideas, and in which various parties negotiate moral citizenship, human rights, particular religious doctrines and ways of conceiving of human dignity and selfhood. In this public sphere religion, and especially charismatic Christianity, also merges into the field of commerce. Religion becomes like a consumption good, a product in a religious marketplace where churches compete for customers. Religious influence then comes not so much in institutional forms, but in more fluid forms of consumer culture and entertainment business. The impact of charismatic Christianity and Pentecostalism lies not only in its rapidly growing number of followers, but also in its much more diffused influence on general popular tastes and styles that may not be religious per se, but are clearly shaped by Pentecostalist discourse (cf. Meyer forthcoming).

Rev. Dr Mensa Otabil and the ICGC

In Ghana, as well as in many sub-Saharan African countries, the popularity of charismatic Christianity has been fast growing during the last two decades, especially among young, educated, upwardly mobile people in the urban areas. Many scholars of Pentecostalism in Africa have related this exponential growth to the ways Pentecostalism addresses the conditions of modernity in the postcolonial society (Asamoah-Gyadu 2000; Gifford 1994, 1998, in press; Meyer 1998, 1999a; Ter Haar 1994; Van Dijk 1996, 2001). African Pentecostalism offers people a ‘package deal’ of salvation, divine healing and deliverance (Vuha 1993). Its doctrine and praxis emphasise a personal experience of the workings of the Holy Spirit, of which speaking in tongues is the first outward manifestation, the centrality of the Bible, the gospel of prosperity, and a rejection of ‘African tradition’.

Charismatics usually distinguish between message- and miracle-oriented pastors, but all draw upon a ‘born-again’ ideology and specific practices of creating the born-again Christian. The charismatic-Pentecostal ‘project of individuality’ focuses on ‘making a complete break with the past’ (Meyer 1998) and achieving victory and success through self-development and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

It is this message of self-making cast in the rhetoric of individual success that seems to attract so many young people to the possibilities of modern capitalism. At the same time the ‘second birth’ also reconstitutes the person as an embodiment of new relationships, both spiritual and human (cf. Englund and Leach 2000:17-18). Born-again Christians are
socially united in their particular church community and spiritually united in the blood of Jesus. Another attraction is the aura of cosmopolitanism and global personhood, of being part of a world community of born-again Christians (see Poewe 1994). Cosmologically, identification with the Holy Spirit is part of a global charismatic-Pentecostal narrative. On the social and organisational level, charismatic churches join international religious associations and networks, particularly in the USA, and organise large crusades with European, American or Asian evangelists, sometimes employing satellite connections and huge screens to link the crowds gathered to the other side of the world. As elsewhere, charismatics have been very successful in their conscious effort to appropriate mass media and establish a prominent presence in the public sphere. Pastors have eagerly taken up the possibilities of the liberalisation of the airwaves both to spread their message and also to mediate the miracles they perform to an audience beyond the confines of their churches. Simultaneously, they connect with business and consumer culture. Charismatic pastors run their church like a business and put a product in the competitive religious market, thereby opening up a range of economic opportunities (Gifford 1998). Moreover, their engagement with television, radio and the music industry makes religion an important source of entertainment. Finally, these churches strongly proclaim a message of ambition, achievement and economic opportunity, directed at the upwardly mobile. ‘Indeed, churchmen like Otabil regularly present themselves as entrepreneurs who have developed a successful enterprise, and thus as models for enterprising businessmen’ (Gifford 1998:91).

With over 100 branches, its 4000-seat Christ Temple in Accra counting about 7000 members and a weekly prime time TV programme, the International Central Gospel Church is one of the largest and most influential charismatic churches in Ghana. It was founded in 1984 amidst a wave of Christian enthusiasm and new spiritual awareness. Early meetings were held in a small classroom, but to accommodate the rapidly growing membership a garage, a cinema hall, and a scout hall were rented. In 1996 the church completed its own huge church hall, which is used for regular services, conferences, concerts and other activities. Active missionary church planting has resulted in branches all over Ghana, in other parts of Africa as well as in Europe and the United States. The ICGC actively participates in Ghana’s civil society, as do many other churches. The church has established the first private University in Ghana, the Central University College, instituted an educational scholarship scheme, and has a Non-Governmental Organisation,
which provides support to the needy. As a pioneer in practical Christianity, the church organised and hosted several Christian Trade Fairs to encourage ‘entrepreneurial development in the entire body of Christ’ in the country.

As do most charismatic churches, the ICGC leans heavily on the personality, vision and charisma of its founder and leader, Rev. Dr Mensa Otabil. On the ICGC website (www.centralgospel.com) and in other church publicity he is presented as follows:

The general overseer Mensa Otabil is a respected Christian statesman, educator, entrepreneur and an international motivational speaker. He oversees the multifaceted network of ministries of the International Central Gospel Church with its Headquarters in Accra, Ghana and serves as Senior Pastor of Christ Temple. His over-riding passion is to see the timeless principles of the Bible made applicable to the renewal and transformation of Africa. His messages speak to the pertinent issues of a continent and a people seeking solutions to their perplexing challenges. Dr. Otabil is Chancellor of Ghana’s premier private university—Central University College. He also serves on several Boards and Trusts of organizations committed to human upliftment and presents the inspirational radio and television broadcast—The Living Word. He and his wife, Joy, reside in Ghana’s capital city of Accra with their four children—Sompa, Nhyira, Yoo/Abotare and Baaba Aseda.

Otabil, and for that matter the ICGC, is strongly committed to the development of the country, and particularly to education and entrepreneurship. He propagates what he calls practical Christianity and aims at making the Bible an effective ‘tool for life’ for everybody. Core values are independence, human dignity and excellence. The church’s mission statement, ‘Shaping vision, raising leaders, and influencing society through Christ’, is projected on a screen during church activities and mentioned during broadcasts. Through its teachings, various church activities, and carefully supervised membership procedure, the church commits itself to producing a particular type of individual to help build not only the nation, but also the world.

It is the commitment of ICGC to provide the opportunity, facilities and tools for the release, development and sharpening of the gifts, talents, skills and abilities of its members. By this we expect to produce mature, intelligent, principled, spirit-controlled, individuals who will exercise dominion on earth in the true expression of their leadership potential. These individuals who are vitally and experientially committed to God through a personal relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ would be empowered to be the salt and light of the world in which they live. We are confident that such individuals will have the capacity to bring direction to our world.

Otabil differs from many other charismatic pastors in his special commitment to the mental liberation of black people in the world, to true independence, freedom and self-esteem. This commitment, underpinned
with the Bible in his book *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia* (1992), is spelt out on the website as follows:

We trust God to enable us to present to the world the eternal truths of the Bible in a form that is doctrinally sound, spiritually inspired, mentally challenging and socially relevant. The Gospel of Christ should not be seen as passive and escapist for people who are perplexed by the world’s problems but an answer to man’s real questions. For our commitment to the oppressed peoples of the world who are disproportionately black, our message breaks the shackles of mental slavery and inferiority complex. It builds freedom and self-esteem. It liberates black people from dependency to be truly independent and ultimately live interdependently with other members of the world’s society. We believe that although Africa has gratefully benefited from the labor and sacrifice of other nations to bring the Gospel, education and development to its society, it is now time for Africa to raise its own leaders who will responsibly answer to its challenges. Our message should produce such responsible individuals.

In contrast to many other charismatic churches, which attract followers primarily with miracles, healing and deliverance, the emphasis of the ICGC is clearly on ‘the message’. Although the church also offers more ‘spiritual’ activities, like the Solution Centre, a weekly healing and prophecy meeting, and a weekly prayer meeting, it is only the more rationalist, ‘life transforming’ teachings of Dr. Otabil that are broadcast on TV and radio and constitute the church’s public image. For most church members these teachings also are the major reason for attending, as appears from responses to my questionnaires and from my interviews with the members of Christ Temple. The church’s membership consists mainly of young people between the ages of 20 and 35, and includes, in contrast to virtually all other Pentecostal and charismatic churches, more men than women. A (male) church member explained that

For every church, the membership thrives on the vision of the church. Our vision ‘bringing vision and leadership to our generation’, is more rational than that of many other churches. Otabil is teaching you about society, making you aware of problems and encouraging you to do something yourself. Here you are being told that prayer alone does not work. That rational emphasis attracts men. Other churches have much more women than men, because they focus more on emotion, on miracles.

Otabil usually delivers his messages as series of teachings built around one topic. Messages preached and broadcast recently include titles like: ‘Turning failure into success’, ‘Leadership principles of Jesus’, ‘The spirit of the overcomer’, ‘Opening new pages for your life’, ‘Africa must be free’, ‘Marriage 101’, ‘Positive attitudes for a happy life’ and ‘Transformation’. In these teachings he addresses various problems or challenges that people may experience or that characterise Ghanaian
society, offers people a practical tool selected from the Bible, and encourages them to use it to overcome this problem and achieve something in life. He treats his topics in an intellectual way, tracing the etymological roots and explaining the various meanings of certain words and concepts, referring to the dictionary almost as often as to the Bible, and supporting his presentation first with a white board, but now with a PowerPoint projection. The wide applicability of his ideas makes Otobil very popular among Christians and non-Christians alike and he is widely perceived as ‘the teacher of the nation’.

Format and Experience in Charismatic Religious Practice

Religious events and church services in the ICGC are very much like theatrical performances in which the audience also has a clearly defined part to play. During services and special events the auditorium of the Christ Temple is not only packed with a dancing, singing and clapping crowd, the officiating pastor too is entertaining the audience as an experienced comedian or storyteller, evoking laughter and applause with good jokes and stories and making use of theatrical body movements and storytelling techniques. The ‘format’ of the two-hour Sunday service has several stages and at each stage the communication between the performer and the audience plays a different role in the mediation between the physical and the spiritual world, in the establishment of a relationship between the individual believer and Jesus Christ, and in the generation of a feeling of belonging.

The first half-hour is filled with ‘praise and worship’, led by the praise and worship song team on stage with the backing of the church band. The first few songs have a fast and stirring beat and are aimed at lifting up the people and invoking the Holy Spirit in the auditorium. The entire congregation participates by clapping, dancing and singing along with the song texts projected on the screen. This is followed by a few slower songs, during which people lift up their hands as a sign of surrendering to the Lord and either sing along or start praying aloud or even crying. Then a few up-beat songs bring back the spirit and excitement again to get people ready for the Word of God and for giving a large ‘seed’ to the church. During the first offering, the church choir or band performs, but here the people sit down and listen motionless, even though this music too can be quite danceable. After this comes the main ‘act’ of the service and the only part that makes up the church’s media broadcast, the one-hour sermon by Otabil. He appears on stage in an elegant and elaborate African lace gown,
one of his trademarks, and delivers the Word of God as a lecturer and an entertainer. The audience listens carefully and takes notes of the Bible references and the important points of the sermon, helped by a PowerPoint projection. Otabil keeps his audience active and awake by having them look up passages in the Bible, repeat words or phrases after him, or say things to each other, by inserting jokes, enacting little sketches and using his voice skilfully. After the sermon, Otabil makes an ‘altar call’, whereby all who have not yet given their lives to Christ and want to do so now are called forward and the entire congregation is asked to join Otabil in prayer for the new converts. After this spontaneous act of conversion, the ‘project offering’ (used for carrying out the church’s social and charity projects) is taken while the band provides some more music and the PowerPoint presentation is repeated. People sit down, take out their money when the basket passes, check their notes with the points on the screen, or just listen. Then first-time visitors are asked to stand up to be welcomed by Otabil, church members sitting close to them greet them with a handshake and ushers hand out invitations for the newcomers’ reception afterwards. Before the service closes, Otabil asks everybody to stand up and hold hands. He then speaks his benediction over the congregation, always ending with the words ‘in Jesus Christ you are more than a conqueror.’

While the church’s prayer meetings and weekly ‘Solution Centre’ are much more experientially oriented than the Sunday service, these too are performed according to a fixed arrangement of activities and behaviour. When people are praying aloud in tongues, at first hearing it seems purely spontaneous and unruly, and this is exactly what it is understood to be in charismatic doctrine, a spontaneous manifestation of the sudden presence of the Holy Spirit within an individual. As one pastor explained it, ‘at such a moment, the Spirit is speaking through us according to the will of God.’ But, in practice, it is the pastor who indicates when to start and when to stop praying. Moreover, it is something you can learn by practicing, and some people are clearly more advanced in it than others. Another common practice is the laying of hands on the head of the believer by the pastor, upon which many people fall down. This is interpreted to be a response to the touch of the Holy Spirit, but it also happens within a format of body posture and timing, which inexperienced newcomers are helped to acquire by the ushers.

Charismatic religious practice thus presents a paradox: the performance of learned and prescribed behaviour goes together with a spontaneous experience of spiritual power. This tension between disciplinary format
and inner experience is also illustrated by the church’s highly supervised and bureaucratised route to membership. All prospective members are required to follow ten ‘discipleship classes’, during which they learn about the basics of charismatic Christian doctrine and about the ICGC specifically. Significantly, after the lesson on Holy Spirit baptism, many people ‘spontaneously’ experience this and start speaking in tongues. After completion, supervision continues in neighbourhood ‘covenant families’, various church departments and other classes, for example marriage preparation. At various stages members are requested to fill in forms concerning their Christian life and spiritual growth. The sexual and social discipline required of church members is high. From the moment a person joins the ICGC, s/he is socialised into the church community as a born-again Christian through a learned discipline of prescribed and forbidden practices, but at the same time s/he internalises the narrative of deep inner transformation which presents this change in a person’s behaviour and lifestyle as a result of an inner meeting with Jesus Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is this far-reaching inner change that Otabil aims at when he teaches about ‘transformation’ and advertises his tapes as ‘life transforming ministry’.

*Altar Media and the Making of Living Word*

The ICGC media ministry is the responsibility of the church’s media department, Altar Media. It is concerned mainly with communication and marketing and comes under the larger body of Altar International, which also includes a publishing company and a bookshop. Its aim is to market the products of the church, which include religious conferences (also marketed as ‘products’), video and audiotapes of guests speakers at ICGC conferences, books and tapes by other ICGC pastors, and church paraphernalia like calendars, stickers, book marks etc. The focus, however, is on Otabil’s products, that is, the weekly TV and radio programme *Living Word* and the *Living Word* video and audiotapes. With five staff members with an educational and professional background in media as well as a religious commitment to the church, Altar International is purely commercial and supposed to—but in practice does not yet—operate independently of the church. The name Altar comes from the idea that, as a staff member put it, ‘everything that comes from the altar, everything that is preached, is to be commercialised’, in other words, to be made available to the public in a commodity format. This started as a tape ministry right from the birth of the church. Sunday services were recorded and sold to the public on audio and videotapes
and there used to be a video library. With the rise of FM stations, Altar Media expanded and since 1995 Otabil has been on radio in Accra and later also in other towns. When the first private free-on-air TV station started broadcasting in 1997, Altar Media applied for air-time and started telecasting *Living Word* every Sunday evening. Altar Media is also involved in public relations. When Otabil goes out to give speeches or to preach, Altar Media supplies the information to the organisers of the events. The Altar staff control and analyse anything that leaves the boundaries of the church and becomes accessible to a wider public.

A clear vision of the relation between religion and technology informs ICGC’s media ministry. Clifford, one of Altar Media’s staff members, explains:

> For some churches [...] technology does not go together with the divine inspiration in the pastor’s work. In traditional religion too knowledge was not widely shared. The person kept it secret and surrounded by mysticism and when he died the knowledge was lost. But churches have to use all new technologies available. If they don’t do that, they will be behind and die. The Devil is using all technologies, so we also have to use the same weapons to fight him. [...] Churches have to go beyond the confines of their buildings. In contemporary society journalists have more influence on society than pastors preaching in their churches, because television and especially radio are everywhere. So if we don’t want to lose out, we have to use the media to spread the gospel and not say technology is of the world. That whole separation between sacred and secular should be broken.

Media technology, however, should not be used randomly. Clifford has clear ideas about how to use the media effectively by employing a format that reinforces a pastor’s personal ‘ministry gift’ from God.

> As a minister using the media, you have to determine what media format is suitable for your specific calling or ministry. You should not use a certain format because somebody else is using it successfully. Otabil is first of all a teacher, not a prophet or whatever, so we use a format that reinforces and clarifies his teachings. Others may be in the ministry of prophecy or healing. The focus of Korankye Ankrarah [another TV preacher whose programme is made in the ICGC studio] is the manifestation of the power of the Holy Ghost. To bring that over needs a totally different format. Many pastors today use the media just to showcase their church, but you have to use the media according to your personal calling. Whether your ministry is healing, or prophecy or teaching, the media format you use should suit your purpose. That is all marketing is about. Determine your target group, determine what you have, and find the best ways to get what you have to your target group.

Over the years the *Living Word* programme format has thus developed in line with Otabil’s divine calling as a teacher. In the early beginnings the programme included the choir, some praise and worship, and the sermon. The viewers were lifted up and spiritually prepared to
receive the Word. Later it included shots of Otabil standing at the church entrance to welcome people. The current format focuses on the teaching only. ‘Praise and worship is also important’, says Clifford, ‘but we want to use expensive airtime to inform and transform people, as that is the main purpose of the media ministry’ and indeed, of the church as a whole. Living Word, then, is basically a broadcast of the church sermon preceded and followed by Otabil addressing the viewer personally from his office. As each Sunday sermon is cut into two parts of less than thirty minutes, Otabil, speaking with a media broadcast in mind, briefly revisits the major points after thirty minutes. Each sermon thus provides material for two weeks broadcasts. Only the messages found to be suitable for the general public are broadcast. Otabil thought, for example, that the series ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’ was too much geared towards Christians only, but after discussion with the Altar Media staff decided to broadcast it anyway. The latest plan for the programme format is to include short clips of people on the street commenting on how the topic for that week relates to their personal lives.

Much inspiration for making Living Word comes from American televangelists like Benny Hinn, Billy Graham, Morris Cerullo, and Kenneth Hagin, who reach Ghana through Trinity Broadcast Network, available on cable TV. As Kofi, another staff member, said:

We watch those American TV preachers and try to use some of the things they do there. But we should think about our audience here and not lose the Ghanaian identity. It is more things like how the programme is done, how it is compiled technically, that we try to copy. People like Benny Hinn and Billy Graham also use the media to suit their specific ministry. When you look at Benny Hinn on TV, you see him not preaching to a congregation, but ministering to individuals.

So although much of the content of the messages is specifically Ghanaian, much of the broadcasting format derives from American televangelism.

For filming, people and cameras are hired from outside. Mostly they are church members who work at the TV station TV3 and do this privately as ‘moonlighting’. They use three cameras to record from different angles, while Clifford coordinates the recording. There is one master camera, fixed on a platform in the middle of the church auditorium, recording only Otabil’s sermon and movements. A sub-master camera is fixed on the balcony and records Otabil on stage in front of his audience and overviews of the audience from above. A moving camera is used for ‘cut-aways’ of the congregation, close-ups of people in the church reacting to Otabil preaching. The film crew, with the help of the security department, also acts as a ‘gatekeeper’ to prevent...
others from recording. For example, I was allowed to film anything except Otabil’s preaching, because he sometimes says things that are not meant for consumption outside the church and outside its control. Altar Media thus guards the border between inside and outside the church and wants to have full control over what passes this border to make sure that nothing could possibly damage Otabil’s or the church’s image. The media are used to create Otabil’s public image and this process is carefully controlled by Altar Media. Editing of the outgoing message already starts during the service by preventing anybody from recording what might be edited out for TV. The tapes are for sale, so there are also business interests involved.

How much the film crew are also part of what they are filming was clear during an anointing service (which was filmed for record-keeping, not for broadcasting). Anointing is the application of olive oil to the believer’s head in order to evoke healing, blessing or special powers from the Holy Spirit. The pastor can do it or the believers can do it themselves from a cup of oil that is been passed round. Often it goes together with sowing a financial seed to the church and sometimes with the sharing of communion. The film crew participated in these rituals at the same time as filming them. When the cameraman filmed people holding their donation envelopes in the air to pray over them, he was holding his own envelope in his mouth. During the anointing, when people put the olive oil on their heads with their hands, the cameraman filmed this with one hand and placed the other on his head. The wire-carrier followed him also with his hand on his head. When the bread and wine were passed round for communion, one of the crew who was not busy at that moment took some cups and rounds of bread for her colleagues and put it on the camera table for them to take later.

Once every month Otabil’s office is turned into a film set to record the ‘intros’ and ‘outros’ for four broadcasts at a time. In the otherwise carefully guarded sacred office space with its expensive furniture, gold light switches and sockets, and newest computer equipment, the plants are moved to make an attractive background, furniture is rearranged, a camera and three lights are set up and colour filters fixed. The salon table is emptied of its decorations and a monitor, control board and sound machine are placed on it. Otabil talks to the camera without notes, sitting behind a round table with his hands resting on a large Bible, which he never opens. With his fatherly voice he welcomes viewers to the programme, introduces the topic and briefly recapitulates last week’s teaching. For the ‘outros’, Otabil starts with ‘well, my friend . . .’ and stresses the importance of the message for one’s personal life.
Sometimes he asks the viewers to bow their heads and pray with him. While praying he leaves just enough time for viewers to repeat his words. He thanks them for watching, urges them to write to or email him and concludes with his well-known ‘signature’ phrase ‘my name is pastor Otambil, shalom, peace, and life to you’. In between the recordings, Otambil changes his dress to match what he wore on the day he preached the message.

All the post-production is done in the Altar Media studio in the church building: design, editing, duplication, labelling, packaging, promotion and distribution. Only three other churches have their own studio: the Word Miracle Church International, the Church of Pentecost and the Christ Apostolic Church. The ICGC studio seems to be the most advanced, even more so than the editing studio of TV3, because the church invests a lot in professional equipment. For example, the Altar Media studio was recently expanded with new, powerful computers and an editing deck for both Betacam and digital video. Finished productions are stored on digital video and compact disc. A pile of six video-decks is used to duplicate tapes and a new professional colour printer enables covers to be printed ‘in house’, making it affordable to give each message its own cover.

To broadcast Living Word, Altar Media has agreements with various TV and radio stations. Every Sunday evening at six o’clock Living Word features on TV3, which normally covers most of Southern Ghana, but, as viewers’ letters testify, during the harmattan season it may reach as far as Nigeria. Airtime costs $600 per thirty minutes, but this is paid for by sponsors of the church’s media ministry. The current programme sponsor is Kingdom Transport Services, a successful transport company owned by an ICGC member, who attributes his business success to his membership of the church and Otambil’s teachings. A KTS advertisement now follows every Living Word broadcast. In early 2001, Living Word was aired on the national station GTV on Monday mornings at 5.30, thus reaching the whole of Ghana, but this lasted for only four months; the station charged too much. In Kumasi the programme is on Fontomfrom TV twice a week, two weeks later than its broadcast on TV3. Living Word is also broadcast on TV in Kenya: since November 2000, Nairobi and environs have received Living Word weekly through a Christian broadcast station called Family TV. Altar Media is currently discussing a new package with African Broadcast Network, which will take Living Word to thirteen African countries at once. The radio version of Living Word (formerly called Believer’s Voice of Hope) is on JoyFM in Accra every Sunday morning at seven, the church paying for airtime.
Messages preached and recorded in the past are broadcast daily on Radio Gold, every afternoon at two. The managing director of Radio Gold is a great fan of Otabil and does not require any payment. He has partnerships with entrepreneurs who sponsor the programme. When Altar Media started with Gold, they also used the earliest messages, until Otabil said that they should not go back so far, because at that time he did not preach with radio in mind and a lot of editing was necessary to make the messages fit for broadcasting. Indeed, since his messages reach new audiences through radio and TV he has changed his way of preaching. He told me that, when he preaches, he does not talk to the Christian crowd in front of him, but to a single person in his mind, a non-Christian visiting the church for the first time, for whom everything is still strange. Outside Accra Altar Media has weekly programming on Sundays in the Brong-Ahafo region, in Kumasi on Luv FM, in the Western Region on Sky Power FM, and in the Volta Region on Volta Premier station, but, because the CDs have to be sent to the various stations, they lag behind Accra by a week. New communication technologies make it easier: as JoyFM and Luv FM are on the Internet together, they can now beam the programme from the website to Luv FM by connecting the mixer in the studio to the station’s website.

Such technological innovations inform Altar Media’s choice of radio stations, ‘because as things get better, you have to move along with it’, as Bright, the head of Altar Media, said. Another consideration is the target audience:

We do not want to put our messages on Christian radio stations, because then you will not reach the non-Christian who will never tune into such a station. We want to reach an audience as wide as possible, so we prefer the secular stations. But Otabil should also not come on Peace FM. His target audience are not the Peace FM listeners. Peace FM is the Twi station and Otabil aims at the educated, English-speaking group. They listen to Joy.

As soon as a message is aired, people want to have the tape. Altar Media thus makes sure that the tapes are available very shortly after or even before the broadcast. Audiotapes are distributed through the Altar Bookshop, the Christian Music Shop, the Radio Gold office, A-life Supermarkets Kumasi, filling stations, and some private distributors; videotapes are on sale only in the Altar Bookshop. Marketing strategies include various campaigns, such as the Sweet Sixteen promotion, offering sixteen tapes for the price of fourteen, or the Golden Surprise Packs, offering packs of thematically grouped tapes (finances, leadership, prosperity, faith, new life and heritage) at a small discount.
There are also gift packs of tapes in decorated baskets and luxury cases with sets of four, five or six audiotapes and beautifully designed colour covers for export, Altar Media’s latest pride. Bright enthuses:

That is one of the interesting things about this job. We are sitting here in Africa and using our creativity to produce something for the international market. We make creative products while there is not even a local market for it. These new tape packages are mainly for outside, but everything is done here, the designing, the editing, the graphics, the layout, the packaging, everything.

Altar Media also produces TV and radio advertisements for Living Word tapes. During the soccer World Cup in June 2002, for example, an advertisement for the ‘turning failure into success’ series was shown on Sundays after Living Word. It compared life to a soccer match; you can win or lose. Images of a player falling down during a match had the subtitle ‘failure’; a team winning the cup, with the audience cheering, was labelled ‘success’. Then an enthusiastic voice announced ‘now you can win and turn your failure into success with Mensa Otabil’s messages on audio and video tapes, priceless inspiration’. The series was already very popular, but this advertisement gave sales figures an extra boost.

In addition to spreading the gospel, Altar Media thus has a strong business aspect. But according to Bright, bringing church and business together is not yet obvious to everyone.

The church still does not run as a business, ideally it should, but it still doesn’t. The attitude of the people in the church is not like that. Even the word itself: church—non-profit, business—profit. It is very difficult to make them meet. We try here, but we are not there yet. People’s attitude is that ‘Oh, this is church, we just have fun and worship God.’ But God himself wants profit, he is a profit-minded God as Doc [Mensa Otabil] has said. He has laid down management principles in the Bible. Business management started from the Bible. But somehow that seems to be lost in the church today. People think we are here to fellowship only, so they come to the office and chat the day away.

Yet, the whole production process of Living Word shows that Altar Media successfully operates on the intersection of religion and marketing. For Altar Media the market is not a profane place to keep away from as a church, but to enter with vision and professionalism in order to ‘influence society through Christ’. It is the logic of marketing that shapes the format employed by Altar Media to sell the gospel and transform as many people as possible.
Editing Otabil and his Audience

Looking closer at the editing process in the Altar Media studio, where I spent much time with the editors Clifford and Kofi, reveals interesting details about how Living Word not only addresses but also creates the audience. Certain passages of the message are edited out. First, statements with political implications, because ‘the newspapers will misrepresent it and politicians will not understand’. For example, a critical, political statement about HIPC was left out, and, after the passage ‘if you want to turn failure into success, follow what God has put in your heart’, the final words ‘not what the government officials are saying’ were cut. Kofi explained: ‘this is in-house, it is preaching for people to get motivated, not teaching. This [TV programme] is not a platform for critique on the government. Doc does that elsewhere, in newspapers or radio discussion programmes, but this is meant for teaching to help the people.’ Secondly, sarcastic statements are cut, for example ‘if you want to follow that agenda, follow it!’ Thirdly, specific information for the congregation, for instance about church programmes, is not relevant for a larger audience. Finally, long pauses, as when Otabil wipes his face or waits while people are looking for a passage in the Bible, are minimised. ‘We have only half an hour and else it becomes too boring.’ When the message is ready, Kofi inserts ‘power quotes’, powerful statements made by Otabil that reflect the core argument of the message. Put in graphics under the image on screen, they are primarily meant to help the TV audience to follow the lines of thought and take notes. They should thus stay on long enough for people to copy them. An example from the message ‘Transformation’: ‘When you conform to your world, you will only become what your world wants you to become.’

Editing also enhances Otabil’s charisma. Close-ups, almost intimate sometimes, of the man that only a few people can come close to in reality are followed by wide-angle shots that show him elevated on the stage, watching over his large congregation. The ‘general overseer’ indeed. Shots that highlight his impressive dress are included, as when he spreads his arms in making a statement, and shots that make him look small are left out. This display of flamboyance and elegance on stage, combined with close-ups of his face and a personal word to the viewer, whom he always calls ‘my friend’, suggest that Otabil is a man of the people who, despite his mega-church and his successful rise to the top in many spheres of life, does not feel superior and relates to the common man in a personal and egalitarian way, with a warm
heart, a listening ear and a word of encouragement for everybody. The facts that in practice he rules his church in a hierarchical and authoritarian manner, that protocol makes it very difficult to get access to ‘the big man’, and that hardly any of the letters or emails written reach him personally, does not affect the charisma of his televised personality.

Just as Otabil’s public personality is edited, so is his audience. ‘Cutaways’ of the church audience are mixed with shots of Otabil preaching. From the raw recordings of the moving camera, different shots of audience reactions are selected, categorised and saved in digital folders named ‘opening Bible’, ‘reading Bible’, ‘nod’ and ‘lifting of hand’ (meaning agreement or confirmation), ‘clap’, ‘smile, laughter’, ‘attention’, ‘writing’, ‘say after me’, ‘shout’. What we then see on TV are beautifully dressed people taking notes, listening attentively, applauding and laughing. We see them admiring Otabil, learning something from him, and having fun together. We see close-ups of their faces when the words bring them into a state of exaltation or near-trance. Hearing Otabil’s deep voice in the background, we can almost see the Holy Spirit flowing into them. But what we do not see on screen, what is purposely left out, is even more enlightening. Kofi explains:

Certain shots of people in the audience do not fit the format. We have a certain format and some people do not conform. For example people who are sleeping, not paying attention, chewing gum, looking straight into the camera, or people who do not look neat, should not appear. Or shots where people are walking in the background. It gives a wrong impression when people are walking about when church is going on. Or shots with empty chairs in view. That doesn’t help the ministry.

The editors also look at dress or hairstyle, because a person carries a message by his or her appearance. A shot of a woman wearing a very low-cut dress was left out, because ‘we don’t want to expose her and create a wrong impression’. According to Kofi, shots of the audience are meant to

bring across the communication between Otabil and the audience. So the shots show non-verbal communication. Facial expression, mood, gestures. We look at what people are communicating. It should add something to the message of the main speaker. Somebody chewing gum does not add to the message, while somebody nodding or clapping does. The shot should fit into the message.

Making the shots fit the message requires some manipulation. When there are no good, fitting shots of that day, shots of another day can be used. But then care must be taken, for example, that you ‘don’t put a shot of people opening the New Testament when Doc refers to the book of Numbers. If you have to cheat, you have to be smart.’
Similarly, it should not be possible to read what someone is writing, in case it is not what Otabil is saying at that moment. Sometimes Kofi makes the audience react differently from what happened in reality if that seems better. When he was editing a message where Otabil preached against eating fat, he put a cut-away of a laughing audience after the serious statement ‘take some kelewele, kaklo or tatali,\(^8\) wrap it in a tissue and squeeze . . . the amount of oil, you’ll be amazed what you have been drinking’. I found this strange, and when I asked if the audience really laughed at that point, Kofi replied ‘No, but I am editing. It is serious, but funny. The humour is that you have been drinking oil.’

Through the Living Word format, then, there is constructed not only a specific public image of Otabil, but also a specific image of his public, the immediately visible embodiment of the ‘achievement’ and ‘success’ he talks about, and a specific way in which people are supposed to react to his message. Kofi explained: ‘people at home like to identify with the people they see on TV. If they see the people there nodding in agreement, they also want to agree with the statement.’ Moreover, the manner in which the people on the TV screen are seen receiving Otabil’s preaching is vital for his public image and charisma. When he speaks, the crowd of thousands is orderly and full of attention and devotion, laughing when it is appropriate to laugh and nodding when it is appropriate to nod. The church audience is shown to admire Otabil and the TV audience is expected to do the same.

**Audience Response**

According to recent audience research by Research International, a private company in Accra, and by Ghana’s TV & Radio Guide (Nr. 97, January 2003), Living Word is among the most popular TV programmes. With half of the TV3 audience and a considerable number in Kenya watching, Altar Media itself estimates that it has an audience of two million. The ICGC’s media audience is much broader and more diversified than the church membership. As Otabil’s message is very relevant to everybody, it is composed not only of charismatic Christians, but of people of different churches and religions, including many Muslims. Otabil’s use of the English language, scholarly way of preaching and appeal to the intellect limit his ‘target audience’ to the educated middle class. Although in terms of age too the media audience is much broader than the church membership, Otabil’s message is especially attractive for young people. In these ‘Hipik-times’,\(^9\) with their high rate of unemployment also among the educated and a general feeling of
lack of improvement, young, aspiring people crave a charismatic role model who tells them that they are somebody, that they have talents to develop, that they can become successful and rich. Moreover, his teachings can easily be related to personal problems and experiences. I have heard many reactions like ‘he talks about the real problems we face in Ghana’ or ‘when I heard him preaching I felt he was talking about me.’ Making biblical lessons personal and practical is exactly what Otabil tries to do. He clearly meets the need of many, especially younger people, for a personal experience of Christianity, even if ‘anonymously’ through a TV screen.

From talking to people about watching *Living Word* and occasionally watching with them, I have come to know something about viewing practices. Many people told me that six pm on Sunday is a special time for them and they consciously sit down to watch the programme. *Living Word* is not a programme to listen to with half an ear while eating, drinking, cooking or chatting. Many people make sure there are no disturbances during broadcast time: some even lock their door. Some people pray before watching that the Lord may allow the Word of God to transform them and bless them. People watch—some rather speak of listening even though it is TV—actively. Many take notes, which they may use later during Bible studies or personal devotion. They say ‘amen’, ‘hallelujah’ and ‘yes’ when it is appropriate, and join Otabil in prayer at the end when invited to do so. Receiving the message often does not end with the broadcast. People buy or order tapes, listen to them repeatedly, and give them away or exchange them. Some decide to join the ICGC or to convert to (charismatic) Christianity after hearing Otabil. A common follow-up action is to respond to Otabil’s call to write to him.

In the *Living Word* correspondence department, pastor Charlotte and her group of carefully selected and screened church members file and answer the many letters (about 400 a month) and emails the church receives. Most of the letters are written by non-members, including viewers in Kenya, who write after hearing Otabil preaching on radio or TV. Some people write just to ask for audiotapes, Otabil’s books, Bibles or information about the church. But many write with a specific problem they think Otabil will have a solution for, or to tell him what his teachings have done in their lives. Some also give testimonies of being baptised by the Holy Spirit or converted to Christianity after listening to him. Letters are filed into thirty categories—including appreciation, salvation, adultery, masturbation, homosexuality—for which standard reply letters have been written, but are modified to suit each
particular case. They always start with ‘greetings in the mighty name of the Lord Jesus Christ’, even when the addressee is a Muslim. Letter or email writers are not pushed to come to the ICGC, but advised to worship at any Bible-believing church. I give a few examples of letters recently sent to pastor Otabil.¹⁰

[. . .] I have been following your messages on JoyFM on Sunday mornings. Some indeed may be irked by the frank and courageous way in which you address our national experience. But, to me, the messages spell out a godly and non-partisan approach to true national reconciliation. My prayer is that the message will accomplish the purpose for which it is sent and that, as the Lord grants, you will also address the issues relating to understanding in the inter-tribal, inter-faith, and economic spheres of national life.

Dear pastor, I thank Almighty Allah for giving you the wisdom and resources to spread your message to the whole nation through Ghana television. However, I was deeply disappointed at people’s ignorance about your message, better still the message of Allah because of the time, that is 5.30 a.m. [when Muslims pray] I pray that Allah will change the minds of GTV staff to shift the time probably from 9am to 12 noon on Sundays so that the import of your message to my people in the North is felt. Perhaps we need the message better. Pastor, I would urge you to continue with your work and I am confident that Allah is using you as an instrument to change our negative perceptions to the realisation of the immense spiritual reality of Africa. God does not hate Africans, our present predicament of wars, poverty, corruption, ignorance etc. are a source of worry but I have hope in the WORD of God. Why did Joseph suffer in the hands of his brothers? Why was he made a slave and a prisoner in the house of Pharaoh? Why was Jesus brought to Africa to escape death? Why Africa and not any continent? Why did Moslems escape from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia in Africa and not any other continent? I hope you would use the scriptures and the pulpit to teach us and that we are not cursed by Allah like Satan.

Dear pastor Mensah, thanks for giving to the lord and doing his will, may the almighty God whose and whom you are, continue to bless his work in your hand. I was just tuning the TV when I came across TV3, while I was wondering which station is this, you came on air and began to release the undiluted word of the most high. I sat down and had a good meal of the teaching that evening. What do I say but to thank you for giving to the lord, to do his work. Your audience is not in Ghana alone, but it includes Nigeria, right now I tell my friends about your programme. The series that has just been concluded—opening new pages for your life—is the one I am referring to. I am wonderfully blessed by the exposition of the word of life through your ministry. [. . .] I was encouraged, motivated, reassured and chastised by the message, sir, thanks for giving to the lord. Since I have not gotten it all, the ideal prescription is to get the tapes and listen over and over again and again and again. Sir, how many are the tapes in the series—VIDEO, and what is the cost and freight? I promise to work by the teachings and my testimonies shall soon reach you.

Dear Dr. Otabil. I greet you and your entire church in the name of the Lord, I also thank God for bringing you Otabil into this world, may God bless you and your ministry. [. . .] It was but the grace of god that I met the voice of the great man of God Otabil [. . .] Your message has given me three hundred and sixty degree change of mind, character, attitude and made me even more useful in my
local church. Through your teachings I have high and deeper understanding of the word of god.

[...] I am a Catholic anyway, but I love your teachings. Dear pastor Otabil what I want you to do for me is first to pray with me so that any obstacle that is blocking my marriage life would be broken in Jesus name so that my path would be clear and secondly please pray with me so that the man God himself has chosen for me would come my way so that we would live together praising and giving thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A Presbyterian woman wrote a testimony about being baptised by the Holy Spirit while watching the programme. She was busy sweeping the living room when *Living Word* came on and caught her attention. As she heard Pastor Otabil preaching on speaking in tongues, she put down her broom, sat down and listened to the whole message. After the sermon Otabil said ‘let’s pray’ and suddenly she found herself praying in tongues without stopping. For the first time in her life she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Her children started crying, it was such a beautiful experience, and she was so excited. So she wrote to the church to thank Pastor Otabil, saying that she would from now on allow God to use him to bless her.

Although most people engage with the content of a message, the letters make clear that there is also a spiritual side to receiving the message. People speak of the blessings of God being released in their lives, of being totally transformed, of receiving spiritual strength, encouragement, and restoration of hope, and some of receiving the Holy Spirit. Dag Heward-Mills of Lighthouse Chapel International, another popular charismatic pastor, explains this when he writes about ‘the art of soaking in tapes’ in his book *Catch the Anointing*:

‘Soaking’ in tapes simply means to listen to the words over and over again until it becomes a part of you and until the anointing passes on to you! When a tape is fully ‘soaked’, both the Word content and the spirit content are imbibed in your spirit. The anointing is not something you learn, it is something you catch. Do not assume that the ‘soaking’ in of the tape is just an educational exercise. It is a spiritual event. Two important things happen when you soak in a tape. First, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word (Romans 10:17). Secondly, the anointing of the Spirit through the words, comes into you. The Spirit enters a person as he receives the Word of God. That is why many people experience a radical transformation by just listening to a powerful message from the Word of God (2000:12).

The taped or broadcast message thus becomes the vehicle for the Spirit to enter the person. To reverse McLuhan’s dictum, the message is the medium. But what people experience when listening to a message also depends on the topic. When Otabil talks about more intellectual or national topics, people will write to join in the discussion.
When he talks about speaking in tongues or how to receive the Holy Spirit, people will come with testimonies of their own spiritual experience. Letters also express a strong belief in Otabil’s power of prayer and solving problems and, as one writer put it, in his ‘spiritual occupation of the nation’.

**Conclusion: Format and the Religious Subject**

Starting from the tension between charisma and format in Ghanaian charismatic Christianity, I have tried to show how the televisualisation of a religious practice, the teaching sermon, creates a pastor’s charisma and addresses new religious subjects. The liberalisation and commercialisation of the Ghanaian media during the last decade have made possible a partial decoupling of religious form from content and its mass dissemination and appropriation far beyond the churches and their communities. With charismatic and Pentecostal churches buying airtime and broadcasting their services on TV, a specific form of worshipping becomes visually available for anyone, regardless of religious orientation or affiliation.

Charismatic churches celebrate their services according to a specific format. This entails not only a more or less fixed sequence of practices and performances, but also a similarly, but more implicitly fixed pattern of bodily behaviour and vocal utterances required of the congregation. Although much of this audience behaviour seems to be, and is supposed to be, spontaneous and incited by a spiritual touch, it is also, like the choreographed movements of the pastor on stage, governed by certain learned performance rules. In order to be fully part of the social and spiritual community of believers and to take part in the blessings bestowed upon this community by God through the pastor, an individual has to participate in the process of communication between the man of God and the congregation according to this format of clapping and dancing, saying ‘amen’ and ‘hallelujah’, praying aloud, and raising hands at the appropriate moments and for the appropriate length of time. The body and voice of the stage performer, whether the pastor or the praise and worship leader, and the bodies of the audience join together in a communal performance of communication to facilitate a link between the congregation and the spiritual realm and evoke the presence of God’s spirit in the physical space of the church hall.

Paradoxically, this preoccupation with format and communal performance is embedded in a narrative of inner transformation. High
value is attached to personal religious experience, deep conversion, and an individual, meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. It is this experience alone that makes one born again and a ‘real’ spirited Christian. Charismatic Christian practice, however, is characterised by a particular dynamic between the mass and the individual and participating in the performance of a mass event often evokes such inner, emotional experiences. The discipline required of church members with regard to dress, social interaction, sexual behaviour and time keeping is supposed to come spontaneously after a person has met Christ and is filled with the Holy Spirit. Yet, the church membership procedure and the various religious practices show how much this is in fact a process of both supervised training and gradual copying of older church members’ ways. As soon as one joins the ICGC, one starts adopting and internalising both the disciplinary format of a born-again Christian and the rhetoric of the inner spiritual experience.

The formatting of the church audience through performance practices is carried further by editing the audience shown on television, where those who do not conform are edited out. Altar Media has developed a specific television format not only to circulate Otabil’s teachings and transform people, but also to produce a public image of Otabil’s personality, of the International Central Gospel Church, and of its audience. The format that is used in editing Living Word creates an audience outside the church, but more specifically creates a religious subject. Programmes such as these visualise the bodily regimes necessary to appropriately receive the Word of God and with it the Holy Spirit. In order to be spiritually blessed and internalise the Holy Spirit through a message by a ‘man of God’, one has to listen to it in a specified way. Living Word shows how the whole body is involved in a particular way of listening. Bodies that do not listen appropriately and thus do not receive a spiritual experience, but hear mere words, are not shown. As much of what constitutes charisma is the perception of it by the audience, the Living Word format strongly suggests a way of perceiving Otabil and receiving his message. Through a process of identification with the televised bodies of the church audience, the TV audience at home is expected similarly to subject itself to ‘the general overseer’ and to the Word in order to experience the power of the Holy Spirit.

The dynamics between the masses and the individual in religious practice are shown on TV by the intermingling of shots of the crowd of people filling the church hall and close-up shots of individual persons in the audience. The televisualisation of their inner experiences
and emotions provides the format for what viewers at home are expected to experience in receiving Otabil’s message and the Word of God, while at the same time giving them a feeling of belonging to that larger community of believers. As the physical bodies of the pastor and the audience function as a medium in religious practice, so do the televised and edited images of their bodies function as a medium for the Holy Spirit to ‘touch’ the viewer at home through the television screen.

Through the media Otabil’s teachings create an audience far beyond the church membership. As listeners to and viewers of Living Word participate in sharing the church’s message and sometimes engage in follow-up practices of writing letters, ordering and sharing tapes, or even visiting the church, this media audience is somehow part of the church community. Yet the church is not able to control the persons that make up this fluid and not confined community. As the reception of the ICGC message does not go together with close supervision and physical interaction, the ‘inner transformation’ that the message is aimed at cannot be monitored as with the community of registered members. The question then is whether, without this outside discipline, the media format indeed changes religious experience. Pastors like Otabil criticise people’s tendency to identify with and appropriate the charismatic format of worship and being a Christian as a popular style without an inner experience of Christ. Yet, at the same time, they stimulate this by the ways they showcase their churches in the mass mediated religious marketplace. While opening up new possibilities to create and mediate the kind of charisma such churches thrive on, the television format has also posed a new challenge to address the paradox of discipline and spiritual experience.

NOTES

1. This article is based on fieldwork in Accra from July to September 2001 and from March 2002 to March 2003. The research is carried out within the framework of the PIONIER research program ‘Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities’ (see www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion) and under the auspices of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, and is sponsored by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO. Some of the material and ideas put forward here have been presented in my short essay ‘Accra’s Charismatic Screens’ in Etnofoor XV (1/2) 2002, pp. 222-228. I want to thank Zé d’Abreu, Peter Geschiere, Francio Guadeloupe, Anouk de Koning, Birgit Meyer and Martijn Oosterbaan for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2. Scholars also use the terms ‘neo-Pentecostal’ and ‘penteco-charismatic’ to refer to this new type of church that emerged after 1970. The terms ‘charismatic Christianity’ and ‘charismatics’ are more widely used in Ghana and I prefer these to describe the religious field that includes these new, independent, urban-centred, and internationally
oriented Pentecostal churches, called charismatic ministries in Ghana, the charismatic movement within the old mission churches and the numerous charismatic fellowships and prayer groups. Where I describe phenomena or characteristics that the charismatic movement shares with the older type of African Pentecostalism, I will use the term charismatic-Pentecostal.

3. Alternative discourses can be found in the public sphere, but these are often pushed aside by or have taken over the terms and format of the charismatic-Pentecostal discourse.

4. Most charismatic church leaders actively participate in a transnational network of charismatic churches by ministering at international religious conferences and visiting churches abroad. Engagement with secular transnational movements is usually limited to appropriating globally circulating political ideals and discourses, but can also take more concrete forms, for instance Otabil’s participation as a speaker at the International Conference on National Reconciliation organised by the Centre for Democratic Development in Accra in 2001 (Gifford in press) or at international leadership conferences. Another example would be the ICGC’s cooperation with national and international NGOs in the human rights campaign for the abolishment of ‘ritual slavery’ (trokosi) in the late 1990s.

5. While outwardly charismatic-Pentecostal churches generally denounce or at least are suspicious of African tradition, they at the same time implicitly incorporate elements of traditional religion, like the acknowledgement of the existence of various types of spiritual beings, the preoccupation with solving earthly problems, and the expressive and experiential way of worship, into their doctrines and practices. I will treat this continuity between African traditional religion and charismatic Christianity elsewhere.

6. Charismatics generally distinguish between five ministry or leadership gifts: that of pastor, teacher, apostle, prophet and evangelist.

7. For many charismatics, the Ghanaian government’s acceptance of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative was a straightforward acceptance of poverty and thus opposed to their message of achievement and prosperity as God’s aim for everybody. Otabil furthermore strongly criticises the government for going round the world begging for money instead of leading the country out of poverty with a vision of self-development and true independence.

8. These are different fried snacks made of ripe plantain and usually absorbing a lot of oil.

9. Since President Kufour embarked on the ‘Highly Indebted Poor Countries’ initiative, HIPC, also written as Hipik, has become a popular term for poor, poverty, difficult times, or suffering.

10. As letters dealing with very personal problems are handled with great care and were not accessible to me, this selection is taken from only the less personal letters that I was allowed to read.

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