

**New religious “prosperity” movements and their
social and economic implications.**

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Abstract

Religion has reemerged in recent years as an issue of global significance. From a common opinion just a decade ago that religion had all but disappeared, dramatic events in the early years of the new millennium have made social commentators, policy-makers and politicians acutely aware that people's religious beliefs, practices and alignments remain powerful social, political, cultural and economic forces. This changing social role of religion is accompanied by renewed interest in seeing the material dimensions of religion as innate to the nature of religion rather than a perversion of an assumed religious esotericism.

There is a range of reasons for these changes. But a major and significantly overlooked one has been the active reworking of religion within the marketplace of the media. Effective cultural adaptation and exploitation of new media technologies by individuals and new religious movements underlies the global spread of the televangelist and megachurch prosperity movements, evidenced across a wide number of religions and regions. Positioning themselves within the opportunities and needs created by the global spread of capitalism, these local-based, media-extended religious movements offer packages of market-oriented, faith-colored solutions to dissatisfactions and opportunities created by such things as the rise of cultural pluralism, failures in post-colonial national rebuilding, and the economic and political uncertainties of globalization.

The new religious entrepreneurs have capitalized on the opportunities created by the global media marketplace by creating a religious economy built on the production of religious material and products for audiences, not just on "sacred" topics, but on social, financial, cultural, moral and political ones as well. What is being seen globally, therefore, is not just a resurgence of religion, but a significant re-institutionalization of religion and religious authority away from established religious institutions into alternative institutional forms within the media marketplace, by readily adapting to and integrating the fluid practices of media and media audiences.

This growing movement of religion-based, practical economic ideology has significant implications for the social management of religion, national economic development, and the provision of social infrastructure that is crucial to the building and maintenance of a political superstructure such as democracy. Meagher, for

example, provides significant evidence for the contribution of such religious-economic blended movements to developing economies by providing important social and political infrastructure such as literacy, moral probity and industriousness, skills-training, and supportive community and social networks – essential prerequisites for sustaining entrepreneurial initiative and popular participation in national situations where these formal political infrastructures are not well-developed or are ineffective . This paper will explore further some of these characteristics as a dimension of the exploration of links between media, communication and democracy in global and national environments.

This paper sets out to place on the agenda the role being played by what I'm calling new "religious prosperity movements." My focus is particularly Christian, but similar movements can be noted in other religions as well.

What is meant by the concept?

In difference from more indirect links often made between religious belief and well-being, where well-being is seen as a consequence or benefit of believing in a higher power and living an ordered and industrious moral life on that basis – the underlying thesis of Weber's work on the link between the Protestant ethic and modern capitalism – these religious movements are strongly materialist in their practice and unashamedly promote religious belief and practice as means of individuals' becoming healthy and wealthy.

In contrast to the indirect, rationalist, abstracted stance of much of western religion, the theology and spirituality undergirding this stance is a direct, active, interventionist one. There is, it is claimed, an active spiritual force in the universe that can influence daily events. The desire of that power, among other things, is that believers be healthy and wealthy. This power can be enlisted and used by those who believe to benefit themselves – all a person has to do is to claim it by acting in a way that gives that power the opportunity to work.

This religious stance has long historical roots, most recently in American evangelical circles of the early twentieth century, where images of material success were used for promotion and propaganda purposes. But the active promotion and promise of prosperity and health being linked to faith took off in the 1950's with the tent evangelist Oral Roberts. The concept was expanded significantly in the 1970's when Roberts shifted to television and used the concept as a money-making venture to fund his television ministry. Roberts promoted a concept called a "blessing-pact," where people were encouraged to send him money with the promise that he would refund it if donors didn't receive their money back from an unexpected source within a year. Roberts extended the concept into that of "seed-faith," where money sent to him would be like a seed that God would grow into unexpected wealth (Coleman, 2000).

The concept has steadily spread, to the extent that it is now a significant global religious movement, not only in Christianity but in other religions as well, though my

focus is on Christian prosperity movements. This global phenomenon has largely been overlooked in scholarly and social study, for a variety of reasons, including the general lack of interest in developments in religion in a policy framework that, until recently, was strongly guided by secularist frameworks and also the perception that religious attitudes that said that God can make you wealthy if you just believe it were seen as marginal, superstitious nonsense that was hardly worth serious consideration.

However what I'm suggesting is that what has been developing under the scholarly radar has been a significant global, social, cultural, economic and political movement that is worthy of serious study. Let me give a number of examples to illustrate this.

- In Singapore last year, the City Harvest Church, a large Pentecostal church with 28,000 members and an annual budget of \$49 million, that was based in a converted warehouse near Changi airport, spent \$300 million to become a part-owner of the Suntec shopping and convention centre in downtown Singapore. It plans to relocate its religious activities into the shopping centre – a very significant symbolic and ideological relocation of faith into the heart of Singapore commerce and culture. It will also receive a share of all commercial income from convention and conference activities.
- The largest church in South Korea is the Yoido Full Gospel Church, begun in the 1950's when South Korea was one of the poorest countries in Asia, with a mission to present Christianity in a practical way that alleviated suffering, solved problems, and helped people become wealthy. Today it has a membership of more than a quarter of a million people (Kim, 2007).
- Accompanying the economic liberalization of China is a growth in religious belief and practice. While figures are difficult to confirm, different estimates place the number of Christians throughout China now at between 77 and 100 million, more than the number of members of the Chinese Communist Party. If the current rate of religious growth continues, by 2050 China could well be the world's biggest Muslim and Christian nation (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2009).

Among the fastest growing of these religious movements are urban, Protestant house churches, part of what Fenggang Yang identifies as the “grey religious market” where Christianity provides an ideological link

between the rapid changes of the developing Chinese market economy and the global community. It is suggested that house churches are now the largest NGO in China.

“By frequenting McDonald’s and converting to Christianity, young urban Chinese get psychological peace, security, and certainty. They also gain a sense of participating in the new and glamorous dimensions of contemporary cultural change without exposing themselves directly to the vagaries of the global market.” (Yang, 2005)

- A common phenomenon in most African cities now are large Pentecostal megachurches. Many of these have memberships in excess of 100,000, the majority of them urban based with young congregations. But for those that rise to the top of the pyramid, are thousands of smaller village churches all working actively to rise above the crowd to become one of the large and prosperous success stories.
- Africa is exporting its spirituality. The largest church in Kiev, Ukraine is a Pentecostal church of 25,000 members with 70 branches, started and headed by a Nigerian, Sunday Adelaja. The largest churches in England now are African migrant churches.

What is significant about this global prosperity religious movement?

The political and economic context.

A number of researchers locate the rise of these religious movements in the needs generated through the collapse of social and economic systems in the post-colonial. This included situations of severe economic recession as well as political disillusionment with the functionality of institutions of government and also political corruption.

Meyer, in her studies in Africa, notes the rise of these churches during the period of post-colonial economic decline.

“In Ghana economic decline was paralleled by the rise of new churches. These so-called Spiritual churches, which promised their members not only salvation but also material well-being in this world, became increasingly appealing to mission

church members after Independence in 1958. From the 1980s onwards (a disastrous period in Ghanaian socio-economic history which was marked by severe starvation), pentecostalist churches became increasingly popular.” (Meyer, 1998, p. 759)

The Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul likewise was born in the economically depressed 1950's with an expressed intention to provide religion as a way of improving people's material conditions.

The reworking of religion in a global marketplace

Finke and Stark, two American sociologists of religion, have argued that in the modern period, religion needs to be approached and understood as a marketplace, marked by competition, and where those that succeed do so because they offer practical value to their customers. (Finke & Starke, 1992)

Because most of these churches are independent and entrepreneurial in their origins, compared to more established church denominations there were no institutional resources to back them if they didn't succeed - they stood or fell on their ability to address, respond to, and work the market. This has produced a number of characteristics in these churches that make them exemplars of Finke and Stark's religious economy theory.

They are attractive and engaging, with dynamic services that create spectacle and participation, but also link ideology with emotional engagement.

They are accessible. They place a great emphasis on removing language, jargon and clique barriers that would deter newcomers.

They aim for relevance and usability. This shows not only in their worship services, but also in the sort of programs they run and the guidelines given to groups. The focus is on offering solutions to practical personal, financial and family problems people are dealing with.

They retain flexibility in programming and organizational structure.

The reworking of religion in a media marketplace

A lot of study of media and religion have focused on utilizing an instrumentalist approach to analyse how religious institutions use media in communicating their message. These prosperity religious movements need to be approached from the

perspective of seeking to understand how these movements have recreated religion as a media culture. It is not just that these religious movements use media in a particular way – they refashion Christianity within a quite different sort of media culture: electronic, visual, spectacle, mobile, sloganeering, dynamic, fluid.

One of the important aspects of this re-mediation of Christianity is a shift in authority from the authority of the institution to the authority of the audience. In Weberian terms (Weber, 1968), it reflects a shift from traditional authority, which is power legitimized on the grounds of “an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them.” (p.215) to charismatic authority, which is power legitimized on the grounds that an individual is recognized or revered as being extraordinary and “endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” (p.241)

Charismatic authority has no external validation apart from the credence given to it by those who recognize it as authentic. For that reason, Weber saw charismatic authority as the more dramatic but also the more transient of the three types. Weber saw charismatic authority as “the great revolutionary force,” capable of producing “a radical alteration of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes towards the different problems of the ‘world’.” (p.245)

However, lacking external validation, it lasts only as long as it is effective for its followers. In the absence of a wider, validating traditional authority that is rooted in more historical traditions, the charismatic authority reflected in these movements makes the leader dependent on continuing to provide followers – the audience - with sensate and material benefits – consumer satisfaction - in order to keep them loyal. While charismatic authority is theoretically rooted in the personality of the charismatic leader, it lies ultimately in the audience and the validation given to the leader by the audience.

To a significant extent, this underlies the strong appeal to and promise of economic benefit to the followers. Religion in this model is vulnerable to what Baumann (1998) calls postmodern consumer religion, where transcendence is consumerised, customized and commodified for the purpose of producing and enhancing sensations for participants.

Globalization as religious “flow”

As a form of charismatic Pentecostalism, prosperity Christian movements have strong roots in oral culture. Community worship services and prayer meetings are loud, dynamic, participatory, interactive and constantly in motion. It is a culture of “flow” – of words, of people moving in and out of services, workshops and groups, and experiences. Money becomes part of this “flow.”

In Pentecostal spirituality, “words spoken in faith are regarded as objectifications of reality, establishing palpable connections between human will and the external world. They form a kind of inductive fundamentalism. Believers are supposedly enabled to assert sovereignty over multiple spheres of existence, ranging from their own bodies to broad geographical regions.” (Coleman, 2000, p. 28)

Monetary exchange becomes a part of this verbal performance and an indicator of one’s trust in the spiritual power that governs the system. Money is readily given away in faith, generally to the church or the preacher, in expectation that within the flow of a larger amount of money will flow back again. One needs to give in order to receive and whether one is prepared to do so or not is an indicator of whether one has faith or not.

As Coleman notes, “The speaking out of words and the giving away of money are therefore akin to each other in the way they provide means of reaching into a world of opportunity as well as threat...An ideology of uninterrupted flow and reception is reinforced by the global charismatic habitus in combination with particular ways of structuring linguistic and financial ‘transactions’.” (Coleman, 2000, pp. 202-203)

This concept of flow also informs the charismatic engagement with globalization. Pentecostalism is a global movement, both in terms of identity and perspective. Even small churches have the name global or international as part of their title. The pastors of the larger churches dedicate significant parts of their website to presenting images of their international recognition, photographs with world leaders and celebrities. Significant time is given in church services praying for and celebrating success in international visas, business deals, etc.

It’s not just an illusion either. There is an international circuit of Pentecostal leaders regularly visiting each other, with Western charismatic leaders trading funding

support in exchange for the raw spiritual power and energy of charismatic leaders from African, Latin America and Asia. There is also significant interchange between diasporic Asian and African communities in the UK and USA and their home religious communities

Prosperity Christian movements reflect a significant shift in the redefinition of Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America from a colonial mission phenomenon to a genuine interactive global phenomenon.

The political and economic significance of prosperity Christianity

Prosperity Christian movements are significant for a number of political and economic reasons.

Political alignments

Politically, they reflect a conservative social position that is supportive of political positions that serve those interests. Singapore provides an interesting case study in this regard. Daniel Goh paints a compelling case that in order to build Singapore as a modern industrial state, it was necessary for the Lee government to suppress those who undermined that development with opposition based on the grounds of social injustice, preservation of indigenous culture and the promotion of democracy, significant concerns of the liberal and Catholic wings of Christianity. Government opposition to these religious expressions, which at times was quite active, promoted a climate in which alternative groups, whose moral concerns for sexual morality and promotion of the family were shared by the government, were able to prosper.

The political stance is well illustrated by Article 17 of the statement of faith of City Harvest Church in Singapore”

17. We believe that Government is ordained of God, and the powers that be are ordained as ministers of God to us for good. To resist the powers and the ordinances is to resist the ordinance of God. We are subject not only for wrath sake but for conscience sake, rendering to all their dues, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. We declare our loyalty to our Government and its leaders, and will assist in every way possible, consistent with our faith in the scriptures as Christian citizens.

Similar stances can be seen in other national contexts also, where governments are supported, even where there may be significant corruption, provided the government supports the key moral concerns of the religious groups around gender relations, anti-homosexuality, and family values.

Prosperity religious movements as major NGO's

A second significance lies in the place of religious organizations as NGO's and the services they provide in education and training, social welfare services, and the building of supportive networks. With the breakdown of government structures and services necessary for the building and maintenance of the infrastructure of democracy, charismatic churches became significant NGO centres of these basic practical services and supportive structures.

Maxwell, in his study of the Zimbabwean Assembly of God Church, identifies a number of activities (p.14):

- The building of a new consciousness through continuous involvement in religious social and welfare activities centred on the church and through abstinence from previous “traditional rituals and practices;
- Education into literacy, through members being involved into cells where they learn to read the scriptures, then to Christian literature, and then often to professional and academic public examinations;
- Moral reforms through identification of positive and negative behaviours reinforced by church discipline, including
 - Violence at home or beyond is scorned
 - Tobacco and alcohol, significant sources of waste of money, are declared sinful
 - Marital fidelity is stressed
 - Secular entertainment, such as cinema, nightclubs and rock concerts are forbidden.
- Financial reforms, such as
 - Money otherwise spent on ‘sinful’ activities is saved
 - There is a spurning of credit – pay cash or don’t buy
 - Believers are taught how to budget
- Lifestyle changes

- Money saved is ‘rechannelled for purchase of consumer goods, education and savings’
- Smartness and cleanliness are stressed and reinforced by church, where people dress up in new suits, wristwatches, jewelry and hairdos
- “Tradition” is rejected and the church becomes the new family
 - Sharing with the extended family, with associated costs, is interrupted
 - There is an emphasis on the nuclear family, particularly for urban Pentecostals, with the church becoming the new extended family
 - Church communities and informal fraternal networks provide material support previously provided by extended families
- Small scale welfare systems operate
 - New burial societies
 - Collections for weddings
 - Welfare support for the sick, orphans and widows
 - Help with housing in urban environments
 - Support with employment through jobs advertised through church networks

“Free from kin and community to accumulate wealth, the new believer is smart in appearance, trustworthy, hard working and literate, and hence employable... Being born again can create a ‘redemptive uplift.’” (Maxwell, 1998)

Prosperity religious movements and the new spirit of capitalism

Valuable to examine the PRM’s through the lens of the new work being done on the functioning of Capitalism.

Jameson in his work on postmodernism identifies three stages of capitalism:

1. Market capitalism, the growth of industrial capital in largely national markets - 1700-1850;
2. Monopoly capitalism in the age of imperialism - exploitation of the raw materials and cheap labour of colonial territories

3. Late capitalism, multi-national corporations with global markets and mass consumption, creating the world space of multinational capital.

Weber has of course written on the relationship between the Protestant work ethic and the spirit of early capitalism and how the Protestant sense of religious call linked with moral living created a work and life style that supported the making of money through enterprise, frugal living and saving.

Boltanski and Chiapello's work on the New Spirit of Capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) opens up an area of investigation of religious prosperity movements as a significant exemplar of a new spirit of capitalism within the third stage of late capitalism, that of multi-national corporations (religious movements) with global markets and mass consumption.

“There is a recognition that capitalist relations of production cannot function entirely through their own intrinsic logics or through direct coercion. They are always socially and culturally embedded and require appropriate attitudes and feelings in their agents to move the whole system at the human level. Capitalism needs lots of ‘spirit(s)’ to make it work on the human plane. Often thought through from above in terms of the need for managerial or entrepreneurial skills, equally vital for the functioning of capitalist social formations is a subordinate ‘spirit’ from below, a willing submission, at some level, or at least withdrawal of subjective negation, to the formal relations which subsume labour power to the labour process under the direction of capital or its managers.” (Willis & Maarouf, 2010)

It is interesting to investigate the practices of prosperity religion to see how they encourage the making of money with a particular enervating spirit that includes a number of specific strategies: injecting enterprise with a spiritual meaning and calling; teaching and encouraging money-making through workshops and within a worship environment; promoting religion as an important element in the ordering of the financial marketplace; and through various devices that exorcise the demonic forces from money and spiritualize consumption.

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