

Commercialization of the Gospel by Independent Preachers: Trends and Implications - A Case of Meru County, Kenya

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2025.10040090>

Received: 13 April 2025; Accepted: 22 April 2025; Published: 22 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This study explores the commercialization of the gospel by independent preachers in Meru County, Kenya, and its implications for the growth of Christianity. The prosperity gospel's origins are traced to 19th and 20th-century American movements, particularly the "New Thought" philosophy, which links positive thinking and financial contributions to spiritual and material success. Through a qualitative methodology involving semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the research examined the experiences of 30 participants, including independent preachers, congregants, and church leaders. Findings reveal a significant trend towards commodifying faith, with many preachers framing financial contributions as essential for receiving divine blessings. This transactional approach distorts the core Christian message, leading to disillusionment among congregants who often fail to receive promised miracles. The stark contrast between the opulent lifestyles of prosperity preachers and the financial struggles of their followers exacerbates skepticism and resentment. The study highlights the ethical concerns surrounding the commercialization of faith, as it undermines biblical teachings and fosters a culture of exploitation, particularly among vulnerable populations such as women and the economically disadvantaged. Additionally, the rise of independent churches has intensified competition for congregants, further entrenching these practices. The research calls for increased oversight of independent ministries, enhanced theological training, and greater financial transparency to safeguard congregants' spiritual well-being. Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on the intersection of faith and capitalism, emphasizing the need for a re-evaluation of church practices to ensure that spirituality remains a source of genuine transformation rather than a vehicle for financial gain.

Keywords: Commercialization, Prosperity Gospel, Independent Preachers, Disillusionment, Ethical Concerns

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This study examines the effects of the commercialization of the gospel by independent preachers on the growth of Christianity in Meru County, Kenya. The origins of the prosperity gospel can be traced back to the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States, where it emerged from a quasi-Christian heresy known as "New Thought." This movement teaches that wealth and health can be attained through positive thinking, visualization, and speaking affirmatively. Russell (2015) identifies key figures in this movement, such as Vincent Peale, Ralph Waldo, and Oral Roberts, who propagated these ideas through their teachings.

Jones and Woodbridge (2011) argue that the prosperity gospel's roots lie in the New Thought movement, which professes that confession and positive thought can lead individuals to realize their dreams. This philosophy suggests that if Christians maintain a positive outlook and believe in their potential, they can manifest their desires into reality (Harrell, 1985). This recurring theme within the prosperity gospel emphasizes that speaking the right words and invoking universal laws can lead to material and spiritual prosperity.

Horton (2010) highlights Oral Roberts' assertion that Christians possess the authority to declare their desires. However, he notes that Roberts taught that realizing these declarations often required financial contributions to

specific ministries. This transactional view of faith implies that offerings serve as seeds for divine blessings, a concept that has significantly influenced contemporary prosperity preachers.

Westlund (2009) further contextualizes the prosperity gospel within the broader framework of Pentecostalism. Asamoah (2005) defines this movement as one that emphasizes salvation as a transformative experience facilitated by the Holy Spirit, characterized by manifestations such as speaking in tongues and miracles. This self-identification with the early Church is a strategy employed by prosperity preachers to assert their authenticity and spiritual authority.

Russell's study reveals that various organizations support prosperity gospel ministries, facilitating their global spread through media platforms like the Trinity Broadcast Network. This network has amplified the voices of prominent prosperity preachers, making the gospel of prosperity widely accessible and influential.

Gbotoe (2013) traces the movement's origins to the Azusa Street revival, emphasizing the role of early Pentecostal leaders in its establishment. The doctrinal differences among these leaders, often rooted in racial and cultural tensions, have contributed to the proliferation of prosperity movements. This observation is particularly relevant in understanding the emergence of independent preachers in Meru County.

Horn (1989) and Coleman (2000) further explore the marketing strategies employed by prosperity preachers, noting that written materials and personal testimonies serve as powerful tools for persuasion. The prosperity gospel is often framed as a pathway to financial breakthroughs, with preachers promising miraculous returns on monetary gifts.

Oduor (2013) provides insights into the evolution of the Kenyan Church, noting a significant shift towards prosperity-driven practices. The rise of independently-owned churches in Meru County reflects a broader trend where churches are increasingly viewed as business enterprises, focusing on attracting members through appealing forms of worship and promises of material success.

The commercialization of the gospel has led to a competitive landscape where preachers vie for congregants by offering enticing promises of prosperity. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the implications for the growth of Christianity in Meru County, particularly concerning the spiritual well-being of congregants and the integrity of biblical teachings.

In summary, the commercialization of the gospel by independent preachers in Meru County represents a complex back-and-forth of historical, cultural, and theological factors. This study aims to investigate the extent to which this commercialization impacts the growth of Christianity, exploring both the motivations behind it and the consequences for the faith community.

Statement of the Problem

The commercialization of the gospel has turned churches into personal enterprises, commodifying spiritual benefits and undermining the foundational Christian doctrine of salvation and spiritual growth. This trend raises critical concerns about the integrity of faith practices and the long-term sustainability of Christianity in the region.

This study seeks to examine the impact of the commercialization of the gospel on the growth of Christianity in Meru County, exploring the motivations, practices, and consequences of independent preachers in shaping the faith community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This part of the paper reviews previous studies on factors affecting the growth of Christianity, with a specific focus on the commercialization of the gospel. The key areas of discussion include the nature and attributes of independent preachers, the extent of commercialization, its effects, and policies or measures implemented to mitigate negative consequences. The objective is to identify research gaps and provide a foundation for the current study. Insights from other researchers are crucial in refining the research topic and ensuring originality.

Commercialization of the Gospel

The evolution of religious rhetoric in early modern Europe offers valuable insights into the intersection of economic, political, and social transformations with religious ideology (Keith, 2010). This historical context provides a lens for understanding the proliferation of the prosperity gospel in Meru County.

Hobsbawm and Wrightson (2010) argue that the Industrial Revolution significantly altered European society, disrupting traditional livelihoods and fostering new economic ideologies. They observe that early intellectuals questioned capitalism's morality, but as economic forces prevailed, religious rhetoric was adapted to align with market-driven ideologies. They assert: "Observers of social change manipulated religious rhetoric to justify the new market society, which had become necessary for people's economic well-being." (p 43).

This observation underscores the powerful role of religion in shaping societal perceptions, potentially leading to the acceptance of practices that may have once been considered harmful. Thus, religious teachings require careful stewardship to prevent their misuse.

Wrightson (2010) examined the shifting religious rhetoric of the early modern era, noting that economic ideologies such as humanism and mercantilism played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward capitalism. He highlights, (p.45).

"While historians cannot deny that the Protestant Reformation had a hand in this change in beliefs about economic organization, there is no clear evidence to suggest that Protestants were more enlightened about participation in market society than Catholics."

This perspective suggests that economic motivations often transcend denominational lines. The weakening of centralized religious authority encouraged individuals to reinterpret scripture in ways that justified new socio-economic lifestyles. This insight is relevant to the present study, which argues that the commercialization of the gospel is widespread across various church traditions.

More (2003), in *Utopia*, reflects the medieval view that capitalism was incompatible with Christian ethics. He criticized the transition to private property, warning of its potential to deepen social inequalities. This critique aligns with concerns about prosperity gospel preachers who operate churches as personal enterprises, enriching themselves at the expense of congregants.

York (2001) explores the commercialization of spirituality within the New Age movement, observing that, (p.46)

"The New Age is modeled upon, and is an outgrowth of, liberal Western capitalism."

He argues that these movements equate material prosperity with spiritual success, a notion that resonates with the commercialization of the gospel in Meru County, where independent churches frequently equate wealth with divine favor while condemning poverty as a sign of spiritual deficiency.

Grotius (1992) emphasizes that early modern religious thought promoted trade and economic cooperation, positioning faith as a unifying force. This historical perspective informs the present study's advocacy against church privatization and the promotion of collaborative ministry for communal benefit.

Canny (2008) explores the interdependence of religious ideologies and economic goals, highlighting the ways in which individuals have historically used religion to justify economic exploitation. This aligns with the study's argument that prosperity gospel preachers manipulate scripture to shield their financial activities from scrutiny.

Marshall (2008) discusses the historical role of the Church in encouraging commerce, drawing parallels to contemporary religious institutions that engage in questionable financial practices, including pyramid schemes. This perspective underscores the ethical concerns surrounding independent preachers who exploit religious devotion for monetary gain.

O'Brien (2008) asserts that religion has long been used to rally people around economic causes, arguing that prosperity gospel proponents frequently link material wealth to divine favor. This belief system is critical in understanding the commercialization of the gospel in Meru County.

Lynn (2009) demonstrates that by the nineteenth century, capitalism had become deeply integrated with religious thought. His findings are relevant to this study as they highlight how economic transitions influence religious expression, leading to faith-based commercialization.

Coleman (2000) examines the role of media in spreading Protestant Christianity, particularly the prosperity gospel. However, he does not address the glaring lifestyle disparities between wealthy preachers and their struggling followers—a key focus of the present study.

Platt (2010) critiques the prosperity gospel as contradictory to the teachings of Jesus, emphasizing that scriptural misinterpretation often leads to cultural distortions of faith. His critique is particularly relevant to the African context, where prosperity preachers enjoy substantial influence.

Horton et al. (2012) differentiate between true and fabricated gospels, warning against exploitative religious leaders. Although their arguments primarily focus on Western Christianity, their framework is useful in examining how impoverished communities in Africa fall prey to false teachings.

Gifford (1990) notes that many African Christians believe financial success is determined by faith, fueling the widespread acceptance of prosperity gospel teachings. This belief is especially influential in regions grappling with economic hardship, such as Meru County.

The prosperity gospel's roots can be traced to Pentecostalism, which has significantly shaped African Christianity. Horn (1989) highlights that health and wealth teachings represent one of the fastest-growing religious movements worldwide.

Cox (1998) argues that Pentecostalism's expansion is closely linked to American capitalist ideology, which has found fertile ground in Africa. Similarly, Bownie (2004) suggests that ministry success is often measured in terms of numerical growth rather than spiritual depth, leading to weak discipleship foundations.

Bangudu (2013) raises ethical concerns regarding the moral identity of emerging churches, while Hellandendu (2004) critiques the gap between religious belief and practice, emphasizing the need for integrity among clergy.

Amujiri (2002) and Agah (2003) express optimism about Christianity's future in Africa, viewing the continent as a fertile ground for evangelization. However, this optimism must be balanced with concerns about the ethical practices of some independent preachers.

Ongong'a and Akaranga (2013) analyze religious commercialization through the lens of Smith's market-competition theory, observing that Nairobi's religious landscape reflects consumer-driven tendencies. Their findings are particularly relevant to the present study, which examines similar trends in Meru County.

The reviewed literature provides critical insights into the commercialization of the gospel, particularly among independent preachers in Meru County. While existing studies highlight various aspects of this phenomenon, significant gaps remain concerning its implications for congregants' spiritual well-being and the integrity of biblical teachings. This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the motivations, practices, and consequences of gospel commercialization in Meru County, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of its socio-religious impact.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper presents the research methodology adopted in this study to examine the commercialization of the gospel by independent preachers in Meru County, Kenya. The methodology is designed to ensure the credibility, reliability, and validity of the study's findings while providing a structured framework for investigating this complex phenomenon.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design, which allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, experiences, and motivations regarding the commercialization of the gospel. This approach is particularly well-suited for understanding complex social phenomena, as it enables the capture of nuanced individual and communal experiences. By utilizing a qualitative design, the study aims to provide a rich and detailed analysis of the impact and implications of commercialized gospel practices in Meru County.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of independent preachers, congregants, and church leaders within Meru County. This diverse group offered a holistic understanding of the commercialization of the gospel by incorporating perspectives from those who preach and promote religious teachings, those who receive and engage with them, and those who hold leadership roles in independent ministries.

To ensure the selection of participants with direct experience and knowledge of the commercialization of the gospel, the study employed a purposive sampling technique. This non-probability sampling method allows for the deliberate inclusion of key informants whose insights are critical to the research objectives.

Data Collection Methods

The primary method of data collection for this study is semi-structured interviews, which provide flexibility in questioning while ensuring that key themes are explored. These face-to-face interviews, each lasting approximately 5-6 minutes, were designed to capture participants' experiences with the commercialization of the gospel, their perceptions of its effects on religious practice, and their ethical viewpoints on such trends.

In addition to interviews, the study incorporated focus group discussions (FGDs) to allow for interactive exchanges among participants. Two focus group discussions, each comprising six participants, were conducted to facilitate a more dynamic understanding of commercialization trends and their broader implications within the religious landscape of Meru County. These discussions enabled participants to challenge, refine, and expand upon each other's viewpoints.

Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved a systematic process to identify, examine, and report patterns within the data. The analysis followed key steps, beginning with familiarization, where transcripts were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. The next step involved coding, during which key ideas and patterns relevant to the research questions were identified.

Subsequently, these codes were organized into broader themes and sub-themes, followed by a review to refine the themes and ensure they accurately represented the data. Finally, the themes were clearly defined and named to articulate their significance. This structured approach to analysis facilitated the extraction of meaningful insights into the commercialization of the gospel in Meru County.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process, ensuring the protection and dignity of participants. To uphold ethical standards, participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, and their informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring that participants' identities remained anonymous, with pseudonyms used in the reporting of findings.

Moreover, participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were made aware that they could withdraw at any stage without facing any consequences. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the relevant

institutional review board before data collection commenced, ensuring that all research activities adhered to established ethical guidelines.

This part of the paper has provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology employed in the study, including the qualitative research design, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis approach, and ethical considerations. The methodological framework adopted ensures the study's rigor and credibility in investigating the commercialization of the gospel by independent preachers in Meru County.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

This research presents the data, analysis, and discussion of findings on the commercialization of the Gospel by independent preachers in Meru County, Kenya. The paper examined the responses collected through questionnaires and interviews, providing insights into the trends and implications of this phenomenon. Data was presented using tables and figures where applicable. The analysis employs frequency and percentage tables based on participants' responses. The mean and standard deviation are used to analyze questionnaire items, while qualitative responses are analyzed thematically.

Data was collected from selected churches in Meru County, targeting congregants and clergy members of independent churches. The independent variables reflect the participants' perceptions of the commercialization of the Gospel. The researcher employed questionnaires and interview schedules for data collection, with the analysis conducted using SPSS software. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.735, indicating an acceptable level of reliability.

Church Attendance Patterns

The study examined participants' movement between churches to assess their awareness of spiritual uncertainty and religious commercialization. Findings indicate that 59.1% of participants had attended more than one church in the last two years, highlighting a high level of religious mobility as indicated below:

Church Attendance	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
One Church	45	40.9%	40.9%	40.9%
More than one	65	59.1%	59.1%	100.0%
Total	110	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Researcher, 2024

Participant G (Interview, July 4, 2024) stated:

"I have moved from one church to another six times in two years. I was promised the restoration of my marriage, but after months of commitment, nothing changed. Eventually, I lost faith in the promises and left."

Participant V (Interview, July 21, 2024) shared:

"I joined an independent church hoping for a scholarship for my son and financial breakthroughs. I was asked to sow a seed by giving my son's school fees, with promises of divine multiplication. Seven months later, my son was still at home with no response from the church. I left in frustration."

These testimonies highlight the commercialization of religious services, where financial contributions are tied to personal miracles. The research reveals that individuals often switch churches due to dissatisfaction with clergy practices, mismanagement of church resources, leadership conflicts, and misleading theological teachings.

Conversely, 40.9% of participants reported consistent attendance at one church, with a majority belonging to mainstream churches. These participants cited factors such as democratic leadership, transparent management, and doctrinal stability as reasons for their loyalty.

Influence of Independent Churches

The study further examined the involvement of independent churches on religious trends in Meru County. Findings indicate that 58.2% of participants attended independently owned churches, while 41.8% attended mainstream churches.

Participant R (Interview, July 18, 2024) remarked:

"The bishop of my church provides instant solutions—casting out demons, predicting the future, and ensuring financial breakthroughs. This is why I joined."

Participant N (Interview, August 6, 2024) asserted:

"God has given me power to heal and deliver His people. That is why I started my church—to solve all human problems."

These responses illustrate how independent preachers market their ministries as avenues for divine intervention in health, wealth, and social issues. The findings suggest that the commercialization of the Gospel in Meru County is driven by the proliferation of independent churches offering material and spiritual promises to congregants. This trend poses challenges for doctrinal integrity, financial transparency, and accountability in religious institutions.

DISCUSSION

This research highlights significant findings regarding the commercialization of the Gospel by independent preachers in Meru County, Kenya. Data collected through questionnaires and interviews reveal a notable trend of religious mobility among congregants, with 59.1% of participants attending multiple churches within the past two years. This movement reflects spiritual uncertainty and dissatisfaction with clergy practices, as illustrated by participant testimonies expressing disillusionment with unfulfilled promises of personal miracles tied to financial contributions. The analysis indicates that while a substantial portion of congregants (40.9%) remain loyal to a single church, primarily mainstream ones, their loyalty is attributed to factors such as democratic leadership and transparent management. Conversely, the independent churches, attended by 58.2% of participants, capitalize on the promise of immediate solutions to personal issues, often leading to a transactional view of faith where financial sacrifices are expected for spiritual rewards. This commercialization raises concerns about doctrinal integrity and financial accountability within these religious institutions. Overall, the findings underscore the vulnerability of economically disadvantaged individuals, particularly women, who are often exploited in this environment. The study calls for a critical examination of the ethical implications surrounding the commercialization of faith, emphasizing the need for transparency and accountability in contemporary religious practices.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This part of the paper presents a summary of the study, its key findings, the conclusion drawn from the research, and recommendations for various stakeholders. The study explored the commercialization of the Gospel by independent preachers in Meru County, Kenya, examining its implications for congregants and religious institutions.

Summary of Findings

The study sought to investigate the commercialization of the Gospel by independent preachers in Meru County. Data collected from congregants and clergy members revealed key trends in the operation of independent

churches, including financial expectations from members, religious mobility, and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals.

Demographic Trends

The study found that 63.6% of the participants were female, while 36.4% were male. This confirms existing literature that women are more actively involved in religious activities and more likely to be affected by exploitative religious practices. Additionally, 35.3% of participants were illiterate, with the majority being women, suggesting that lower education levels contribute to susceptibility to exploitative doctrines.

Religious Mobility and Exploitation

The findings indicate that 59.1% of participants had attended more than one church in the last two years, a trend influenced by dissatisfaction with leadership, financial mismanagement, and unfulfilled promises by independent church leaders. Personal testimonies from interviewees highlighted cases where congregants were required to give financial offerings in exchange for miracles, scholarships, or deliverance, which ultimately led to frustration and abandonment of these churches.

The Growth and Influence of Independent Churches

The study established that 58.2% of respondents attended independent churches, while 41.8% remained in mainstream churches. Independent churches attract members through promises of instant solutions, media evangelism, and strategic incentives such as free transportation and financial support. Many preachers in independent churches claim to possess divine powers to heal and deliver, further reinforcing the commercialization of religious services.

The research findings confirm that the commercialization of the Gospel is a significant concern in Meru County. Independent preachers have adopted a business-like approach to ministry, often prioritizing financial gain over spiritual growth. The study highlights that economically disadvantaged individuals, especially women, are the most vulnerable to religious exploitation due to their pursuit of financial breakthroughs and social stability. Additionally, the rise of independent churches has contributed to a high level of religious mobility, as congregants frequently switch churches in search of tangible solutions to life's challenges. The commercialization of faith raises ethical and theological concerns that need urgent attention from religious leaders, policymakers, and the community.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Religious Regulation and Oversight

The Kenyan government and religious regulatory bodies should establish stricter oversight mechanisms to monitor the operations of independent churches. Clear guidelines should be set on financial practices, theological training, and accountability structures to prevent the exploitation of congregants.

Theological Training and Doctrinal Integrity

Christian organizations should enhance theological education for pastors and church leaders to ensure doctrinal integrity. Accredited theological training programs should be mandatory for those leading religious institutions to curb misleading teachings and exploitative practices.

Financial Transparency in Religious Institutions

Churches, both mainstream and independent, should embrace financial transparency by disclosing how congregational contributions are utilized. Implementing accountability structures will help rebuild trust among congregants and reduce instances of financial exploitation.

Public Awareness and Education

There is a need for public education on religious literacy to help congregants discern genuine religious practices from commercialized faith-based schemes. Government agencies, religious councils, and civil society should work together to educate communities about their rights and the dangers of financial exploitation in churches.

Further Research

Future studies should explore the long-term psychological and economic impact of religious commercialization on congregants. Additionally, research could examine the role of media in promoting or discouraging exploitative religious practices.

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