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The virtualization of the church: new media representations of Neo-Pentecostal performance(s) in South Africa

Khanyile, Sphesihle Blessing

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Abstract

The advent of new media, more specifically social media, has galvanized and radically revolutionized how religion is experienced, lived and expressed in (South) Africa. Social media has transmogrified the orthodox and normative modes of religious engagement and interaction. Day-to-day religious practices have become highly reliant on the (new) media. It is only logical therefore to foreground and locate the (new) media within the deeper inquiries relating to social phenomenon and social life. Social media has become the benchmark for understanding the transitions with regards to conceptualizing social phenomenon like Neo-Pentecostalism, which in recent times has taken the African continent by storm. This study explores how church performances and practices of controversial South African Neo-Pentecostal church *End Times Disciples Ministries,* led by notoriously shady and delinquent *Prophet Penuel* are represented on Facebook. The study is interested in analysing the online representations of church performance of this particular church. Moreover, the study committed at understanding how audiences (those who engage and interact on Facebook page) decode and interpret the messages and representational exhibitions disseminated through the church's Facebook page. Through the employment of a rigorous Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), both visual and lexical semiotic choices on the Facebook page were analysed in order to demystify discursive, ideological and investments of power. It must be lamented that the intersections between religion and new/social media have been marginally ignored within qualitative epistemic inquiries. This study provides a breath of fresh air in that regard. The current status quo enlightens us that social relations have become vehemently digitized. It is therefore relevant and expedient for digital platforms to be taken seriously within sociological intellectual inquests. Church performances are receiving great impetus and potency on new/social media domains but minimal scholastic investment has been channelled in that direction. The *End Times Disciple Ministries* Facebook page is a platform where the most salient and non-salient representational projects of violence, power, exploitation, manipulation, hegemony, patriarchy are exhibited for public broadcast and consumption.

Key Words: *Neo-Pentecostalism, New Media, Virtual, Social Media, Facebook, Performance, Representation, Power, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).*