

In the world but not of it: Material and spiritual copresence beyond the senses in a charismatic youth church in London

EASA Abstract:

For young Christians in London divine experience is considered to be beyond the senses. In grappling with the limits of the flesh the young worshippers entangle the material with the divine to allow for a copresence (Beliso-De Jesus 2016) which is in the world but is not of it.

In one of London's charismatic Christian youth churches it is often taught that if you are doing it because it feels good, you are doing for the wrong reasons. For the young members the senses are not conduits to mediate divine experience but worldly impediments to its authenticity. Instead, a relationship with God requires the faithful to draw upon a divine knowledge and cultivate a spiritual sensorium which is embedded in a global aesthetic of charismatic Christian faith.

Engaging with existing debates concerning the mediation and materiality, this paper will discuss how the young Christians' concerns with 'the problem of presence' (Engelke 2007) is reflected in their embodied worship practices and material engagement with a global Christian aesthetic. Their church transcends its west-African base through global, media and transnational religious connections while encouraging deeply personal religious relationship with the divine. This, I argue, locates the divine simultaneously interior and exterior to the young worshippers and enables their senses to take on a divine capacity which transcend the body and the individual.

I ask how this might be understood as encouraging a copresence between divine and human actors which does not rely on mediating a transcendent God, but materially knowing the divine through an immanent and spiritual presence. This paper will reflect the entanglement of the transcendent and the material as the young members of this church learn how to feel God without relying on the limits of their physical senses.

During the current pandemic members of Christ Love – a university campus church based in London, have been meeting and praying online. There have been multiple online prayer sessions organised within the ministry to pray against the spread of coronavirus. This kind of small-scale mediated prayer has also been scaled up- where members of the campus church pray online with their parent ministry, Christ Embassy, worldwide. Church members are invited to pray with their church leader, Pastor Chris and his good friend Benny Hinn in a global prayer session which is broadcast live online. In these moments, prayer emanates sensorially and extends itself globally demonstrating an embodied disposition to exceed local and individual practices, into a global imaginary. Mediation facilitates divine experience in multiple places simultaneously and not only transforms and heals the prayerful and those of us who might not be aware we are prayed for, but also attempts to transform the world itself. These sensorial, mediated, and global spiritualities are what I will

explore in this paper. I will think about how the simultaneity of mediated prayer produces copresence, indicating new connections in the African Christian diaspora.

My recent fieldwork has been with young, mostly British born second-generation African worshippers in London. They engage with a range of recorded and live broadcast media inspired from their church headquarters in Nigeria, which becomes integral to their worship practices and spiritual understandings. This de-territorialised and global form of Christianity is one of the hallmarks of growing neo-Charismatic churches, a “world-making” (Robbins 2004) movement which has seen large ministries in west-Africa as a driving force for their popularity worldwide, particularly among various African diasporas.

Often young worshippers at the church where I carried out my fieldwork would use the phrase “in the world, but not of it”- both to describe their embodied dispositions and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Here I will try to trace how the young worshippers position themselves “in the world, but not of it” by drawing on what they describe as ‘divine knowledge’ or epignosis- and the cultivation of a charismatic spiritual sensorium which eschews the worldly and exceeds the carnal senses.

Engaging with virtual and mediated spirituality, the young worshippers participate in and produce a de-territorialised presence- not just in their embodied practice but in relation to a spirituality which is equally external, global, and distant. Many of these sorts of moments reveal the dual aspect of collective charismatic experience. It is at once both worldly and divine- physical and ephemeral, internal and external. This paper thinks through the doubleness of presence and raises the possibility of thinking about the multiplicities and transubstantiations of religious mediation, where the Holy Spirit is known and felt immanently and collectively as a powerful globally transcendent force- what Birget Meyer calls the ‘aesthetics of persuasion’ (2010) or a ‘moral imaginary’ (Seeman 2016). Here I’m working with what Meyer tell us:

“Media and practices of mediation invoke (even “produce”) the transcendental in a particular manner” (2009:11)

I’m interested in tracing the ways the young church members produce the transcendent and how becomes manifested in the world- where global and diasporic Christianity allows for the cultivation of an affective and ontological sensorium which is both ‘in the world and not

of it'. I ask how the transcendent divine is produced through its entanglement with a sensory religious practice which exceeds the worldly and material. In asking this question, this paper attempts to take seriously the ontological and embodied presence of the Holy Spirit, which is so central to the religious lives of these young Christians.

Also, here I would like to try and think of presence as it becomes constituted transnationally and disparately, drawing on the work of Aisha Beliso De-Jesus (2014, 2015) and her concept of co-presence, which challenges the reliance on the transcendental in theories of mediation. Briefly, co-presences can be understood as “multiple energies”, feelings, temporalities, and places emerging through religious practice (Beliso- De Jesus 2014). I hope this might be a way, following Beliso- De Jesus’ arguments to “refocus anthropological readings of diaspora” in the context of global Christianity, as transformational, and not just in terms of transnational connectivity and distance (ibid, see also Robbins & Engelke 2010) . Thinking with copresence might be a way to take another perspective on global and transnational Christian movements, which rather than view Christian practitioners as separate and distant nodes in a transcendent cosmological map, bound together in transnational webs of mediation, instead view the faithful as diasporic actors who produce co-presence and collectively embody and make their worlds spiritual.

Divine knowledge & Global worship beyond the senses

The young worshippers’ engagements with global religious media guide this paper thinking about how presence is produced, how the young worshippers engage sensually with a global charismata, and how this allows them to cultivate a divine sensorium beyond the senses. Unanchored from geographic location and carnal material practice my interlocutor’s engagements with global religious media show how the corporeal senses can take on a global divine capacity, building collective embodied relationality, co-presences, within global Christian movements emerging from west-Africa.

The worship practices of the young Christians I spent time with, are guided by teachings of Pastor Chris, a phenomenally popular Nigerian Pastor and self-proclaimed CEO of Christ Embassy, which has branches across west and southern Africa, and mostly attended by the African diaspora in branches in the UK, the US and Europe. I found myself doing fieldwork

with the adjacent campus arm of this global ministry in London, which I call Christ's Love. They participate in a thriving network of university campus churches across the UK and are popular with both young British born children of the African diaspora and visiting African students.

The distinction between worldly and divine is strongly articulated at Christ's Love, however, worship practices are geared towards making the world spiritual. Many congregants will frame their relationship with God as based upon knowing and knowing through their embodiment of the Holy Spirit, which enables them with divine capacity whereby their carnal being is transformed to be 'Spirit like'. Often Pastors and worshippers alike would warn of the dangers of being a carnal Christian and would tell me that those who worship to 'feel good' are doing for the wrong reasons. This showed me the limits of the body in sensing divine presence and how bodies in their carnal capacities might be an impediment to authentic religious experience.

Pastor Chris teaches his congregants that when born-again, they are now Spirit-like. Although they embody the Holy-spirit, this divine element allows them to extend beyond worldly capacities and understandings, which are manifest in the ability to perform healing, miracles and demonstrate gifts of the spirit- such as praying in tongues. This is not simply the divine taking form in the world but the divine transforming the very substance of reality, even the fleshly body- to enable heavenly beings and divine action.

During services I often watched alongside members some now dated online videos of Pastor Chris. He teaches the biblical notion of *Epignosis*. He describes Epignosis as a 'full and exact knowledge'. The root of the prefix epi- can be translated from Greek to mean- upon, on, over, near or beside. Gnosis translates as knowledge. Epignosis is considered a knowledge which is already existing in the world- it is not simply upon but rather like the epi in epidemic- it is already here. Knowledge in the divine sense is regarded as an articulation of already existing truth, and realised through the word of God and embodiment of the Holy Spirit. I think that, not only does it make a distinction between this world and the divine but points to the ways in which they are entangled and emerge through the bodies, minds and spirits of the congregants.

I can recall on one occasion when I discussed this with Sophia, one of young and only non-black, Pastors after service. She pulled out a bottle of water from her bag and told me that the bottle was her body and the water the holy Spirit- but if I could imagine the water to be overflowing from the bottle- “the Holy Spirit pours out” she tells me- he is not simply invited in”. This might seem familiar and Matthew Engleke (2007:184) also discusses how Masowe apostolics conceptualise the Holy Spirit as having water like qualities. The difference here is that rather than being filled up with the Spirit- the young Pastor described to me her understanding of a born-again self as already possessing a presence which flows out. This allows me to re-think mediation and embodied worship not only as a conduit for a transcendent divine presence but as the sensorial field in which divine presence emerges and flows. Following the flow of the Spirit- or the water from the bottle- as it emerges through mediation might posit for a more ontologically grounded and less transcendent understanding of Christian divine presence.

Each first Sunday of the month most of the church members will stay behind after the service to participate in the ‘Global communion service’ which is a live broadcast of Pastor Chris, who gives a sermon, with pray and worship. As the worshippers watch, some will repeat back the words of their pastor, shout Amen!, join with the worship and prayer segments and occasionally fall under the power of the spirit. Many consider the words of their ‘man of God’ to carry the power and blessings of God- live and direct. The live broadcast enables the spirit to emerge both through the media but in both locations- media facilitating the flow of the Spirit.

So we know that spiritual media forms traverse distance and mediate proximity but thinking about how the sensual intimacy of divine knowledge takes on a global form brings us to the usefulness of co-presence as a concept. It allows us to think against binaries to think about how people, things, and the Holy Spirit can simultaneously be in the world but not of it. Divine knowledge which appears to be transcendent, when combined with physical and sensual mediated forms enables a spiritual outpouring across distance, a multiplicity co-presence.

#Global co-presence, diaspora, and the cultivated sensorium

I think that concepts of co-presences have the potential to open up the role of mediation in global and diasporic Christianity because it forces us to de-centre the sensing and worldly individual in our analysis, taking into account how the divine emerges as collective and transformative. The co-presences of embodied Christianity make diaspora bodies anew, where the embodied experience of God folds into a global discourse of Christianity. This is similar what Beliso De Jesus describes in her ethnography of Santeria practices (2015). She describes how Orisha divinities, spirits, and familial ancestors become recognised being “on, around and in practitioners bodies” carrying with them historical and racial presences. These copresences are embedded in a transatlantic racial-historical matrix which fold temporalities into the sensing bodies of practitioners whereby, she argues, diasporic bodies are made.

It is difficult to import Beliso-De Jesus’ concept of co-presences wholesale to the study of Christianity. She argues that theories of mediation rely on transcendence, itself rooted in latent Christian thought. In fact, transcendence is important for Christians and the relationship between internal and external a distinctly Christian problem (Engelke 2011, Hirshkind 2011). However rather than seen as something which exists beyond, or gets reframed as practice, I think presence can also be understood as a sensory emergence which takes on transcendent qualities. The concept of co-presence also helps to unsettle the gulf between “a divine other place and an earthly here” (Beliso-De Jesus 2014- see also Mazarella 2004)

This sensory emergence is linked to what I describe above. But exceeding the layer of visible technological mediators and representations, which connect live streams in Nigeria to campus classrooms in London, is a co-presence of embodied and sensory expressions of the Holy Spirit, which fills the spaces and bodies in-between. As the young worshippers cultivate a relationship with God, drawing on a divine knowledge, they train their sensory capacities beyond the carnal and material conditions of diaspora in the UK.

Filling the spaces in between, co-presences take seriously the ontological presence and transformations of the Holy Spirit. The embodied sensorium guided by these mediated relationships with God co-produce sensory access points to a shared divine. For this younger

generation of church members their faith takes on transformational quality when they seek to transform themselves and the world around them. Cultivating a sensorium which transforms the worldly body and its surrounding becomes a way for the church members to aspire in Christ and move away from existing narratives of diasporic or “African Christianity” in the UK.

I often found that church members would not speak explicitly about their commitment to live a divine identity as a form of active resistance to racism and marginalisation in the UK. I suspect that my own positionality, as a white and ambiguously unconverted, in the campus churches speaks to this partial view. However, when Micha, a British-born member of another campus church, with shared copresences in west-Africa, told me that he does not see himself a “Christian ethnic minority” but instead aspires to be someone who puts God first and express God all the time I feel that he is encouraging me to take a different perspective on the relationship between the mundane and the transcendent. For Micha, his sense of belonging in diaspora emerges through his embodied expression of faith which is inspired and lived through this spiritual connection to his church in Ghana. Thinking with co-presences mean that if shift my own perception to sense God in him, I might also be able to sense his experience of diaspora, which emerges out of material histories migration and concerns of belonging, but which is transformed as he expresses a global Christian outlook with an embodied sensory capacity which exceeds the mundane.

Conclusion

Global Christianity’s sensational forms make it a force for political and social change and Meyer shows how ‘potable’ affective and sensory Christianity plays out in the globally and in the public sphere (2010). Meyer highlights the importance of mediation and aesthetics to the distribution of presence on a global stage. However, in this paper I have tried to think about how this distribution might have a multiplicity which can take seriously the ontology of a Holy Spirit which flows from and between sensing religious bodies.

Joel Robbins (2009) argues that many Pentecostals and charismatics work with the space between the transcendent and the mundane, giving force to the powerful global movement it has become. He says:

“The axial split between the mundane real and the more highly valued transcendent one mirrors the split globalisation opens between the local and the more highly valued central or ‘global’...” (2009:63)

Robbins goes on to say that although Pentecostals and charismatics attempt to access the transcendent from the mundane, they cannot collapse two places into one. However, I also think that “in the world but not of it” becomes a useful heuristic to think about how global Christianity emerging from west-Africa might transform the spiritual and diasporic experiences of young worshippers in London. Rather than rely on the alterity of transcendence to guide their spiritual lives as way to deal live in diaspora, the young worshippers of Christ Love imagine their spiritual experiences as providing affinity with believers across globe, thus shifting the narrative of diaspora. When praying together with church members across the globe, the worshippers at Christ Love share in the blessing of the same Spirit, anointed through their collective sense of the divine.

For this younger generation of the African diaspora, heaven on earth may not be heaven at all due to the unequal terrain of globalisations forces. But copresence allows us to look two directions at once, both London and beyond, the spaces and bodies between then mundane and the transcendent, where the Holy Spirit flows. Copresence emerges through this cultivated sensorium which shows how the young Christians at Christ love remake themselves and the world beyond the senses. Expressing this sensory knowledge of the divine the young worshippers ensure that while in the world, they are not quite of it either.

References

Beliso-De, A.M. (2015). *Electric Santería : racial and sexual assemblages of transnational religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Beliso-De Jesús, A. (2014). Santería Copresence and the Making of African Diaspora Bodies. *Cultural Anthropology*, 29(3), pp.503–526.

Engelke, M. (2010). *A problem of presence : beyond scripture in an African church*. Berkeley: University Of California Press.

Engelke, M. (2011). Response to Charles Hirschkind^[L]_[SEP]Religion and transduction. *Social Anthropology*, 19(1), pp.97–102.

Hirschkind, C. (2011). Media, mediation, religion. *Social Anthropology*, 19(1), pp.90–97.

Meyer, B. (2010a). *Aesthetic formations : media, religion, and the senses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, August.

Meyer, B. (2010b). Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 109(4), pp.741–763.

Robbins, J. (2009). Is the Trans- in Transnational the Trans- in Transcendent? On Alterity and the Sacred in the Age of Globalization. In: *Transnational transcendence: essays on religion and globalization*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Robbins, J. and Engelke, M. (2010). Introduction. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 109(4), pp.623–631.