Pentecostalism and Neo-Liberal Capitalism: Faith, Prosperity and Vision in African Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches[1]

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Abstract

Focusing on the phenomenal popularity of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCCs) in Africa, this article addresses the apparent consonance between the rise of this type of Christianity and the spread of neo-liberal capitalism. It is argued that Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* can serve as a source of inspiration for grasping this phenomenon, but should not be employed as a blue print because this would blind us to certain aspects of PCCs that markedly digress from Weber's model. A plea is made for investigating central features of PCCs—the emphasis on Born Again faith in miracles, the promise of Prosperity, and the entanglement of media with the message—so as to gain insight in their enmeshment with capitalism, as well as into the internal limitations and contradictions implied by this.

Introduction

In recent years, Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCCs) have gained increasing popularity throughout Africa. Situated in a genealogy of Christianity in Africa (Meyer 2004a), these churches espouse significant continuities with mission churches, African Independent Churches and even the African religious traditions which they despise as belonging to the realm of the "powers of darkness". And yet, the PCCs also have distinctly new features. A salient contrast exists between the familiar image of the rather poor, Western missionary who does not care much about his clothes and outfit, preaching wordy sermons to a congregation seated in

hard pews, or that of the African Zionist, Nazarite or Aladura prophet, dressed in a white gown, carrying a cross, praying for the afflicted in the bush, on the one hand, and the exuberant appearance of the immaculately dressed Born Again Pentecostal-charismatic pastor, on the other. The latter drives no less than a Mercedes Benz, addresses mass audiences in mega-churches, performs miracles in front of the eye of the camera, uses high tech media to spread the message, and celebrates his prosperity as a blessing of the Lord. Preachers such as Benson Idahosa, Mathew Ashimolowo, Nevers Mumba, Chris Oyakhilome or Mensa Otabil are new icons of success, role models speaking to millions of young women and men in this continent.

It is important to realize that the phenomenon we summarize as Pentecostalism concerns a broad and diverse spectrum, brought about by the logic of fission that seems intrinsic to Protestantism and that has also featured strongly among Pentecostals ever since the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906. While this has yielded "waves" of different types of Pentecostal Churches, Pentecostal modes have also spilled into mission churches, African Independent Churches, and beyond. This implies a paradox: while, on the one hand, scholars and commentators note the increasing popularity of Pentecostalism (often expressed through dazzling numbers),[2] and even regard it as the future of Christianity, Pentecostalism itself is not a bounded phenomenon that can be pinned down to one definition. At most, a set of religious core features can be identified, such as the centrality of the Holy Spirit and its manifestation in ecstatic experiences, the stress on being Born Again, and a dualistic worldview based on the opposition between God and the Devil (Droogers 2001). These features crosscut distinctions between Pentecostal churches founded at different times and in different regions, some of which take part in the same global networks.[3]

As stated already, this article focuses on what may be called the most recent, contemporary form of Pentecostalism, as it is exemplified in PCCs. Many scholars agree that, next to sharing the above mentioned core features, these churches are characterized by a thoroughly global orientation as a backdrop against which Born Again identities on the level of the self and the group are being constructed, the form of the mass or mega-church, the emphasis on the Prosperity Gospel, and the skilful use of mass media for the dissemination of ideas (e.g. Coleman 2002). While these characteristics pertain to a diverse set of churches that might each deserve detailed attention, it is also important to state commonalities so as to discern new trends in the articulation of Pentecostal Christianity today, in particular with regard to the widely shared embracement of wealth, modern technologies and forms of mass organization.

In my understanding, this type—ideal type, if you wish—of PCC marks a new phase in the articulation of Christianity in Africa, as well as in Latin America and Asia: a *world* religion in the true sense of the term, exceptionally well suited to face

the dilemmas of neo-liberal capitalism and seize its new opportunities. In Africa, these churches have spread phenomenally since the late 1980s, that is, at a time marked by IMF-instigated policies towards democratization, liberalization and commercialization of the media, which entail the reconfiguration of post-colonial states and the emergence of new public spheres which give much room to religion. They thrive especially in urban areas, and appeal to (aspiring) middle classes. Contrary to expectations generated in the framework of theories of modernization and development which expect a decline of the public role of religion, the spread of these churches occurs together with the turn to so-called democratization and a shift from African states trying to regulate national economies towards a deliberate embracement of global capital.

Indeed, there is, a David Martin (2001) put it, a consonance of Pentecostal Christianity and the advance of neo-liberal capitalism. The exploration of this consonance stands central in this article, which seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent is Max Weber's famous, much debated thesis about the link between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism useful to grasp the current situation? In what ways do PCCs divert from Weber's view? How far can the link between PCCs and neo-liberal capitalism explain not only this religion's attraction but also its limitations?

This article has two parts. In Part I, which addresses Weber's ideas about the genesis of the *Protestant Ethic*, two points will be made. One, backed by the work of Colin Campbell I will argue that the dimension of pleasure and consumption is missing in Weber's rather apocalyptic scenario of disenchanted modern capitalism with its harsh work ethic. Certainly against the backdrop of PCCs' strong investment in the Prosperity Gospel, it is of eminent concern to pay more attention to the nexus of Protestant faith and consumption than a sole focus on the "innerworldly ascetism" foregrounded by Weber might suggest. Second, I will argue that we are well advised to not simply use Weber's thesis as a blueprint for an analysis of the nexus of neo-liberalism and Protestant Christianity in our time. Instead, scholars are required to be alert to ways in which PCCs may question established assumptions about the relation between Protestantism and capitalism, and more generally about religion in our time.

Having indicated certain conceptual limitations of the Weber-thesis for a social analysis of contemporary PCCs, Part II switches to a more empirical level. The focus here is on current PCCs' salient features that spotlight their relation with capitalism today. Using my own research experience in Ghana as a point of reference, I examine a) Pentecostal understandings of faith and attitudes towards the world, b) the relation between the Prosperity Gospel and satanic modes of generating wealth, and c) the intersection of Pentecostal vision with new media technologies. In so doing, differences between contemporary Born Again believers and Weber's seventeenth-century Calvinists are drawn out, and currents PCCs' internal

contradictions and ambivalences are highlighted. The main concern of this article, summarized in the conclusion, is to think with and against Weber in confronting PCCs' intricate entanglement with capitalism in our time.

I. The Protestant Ethic

Ascetism and Consumption

Recently, much attention was devoted to the centenary of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, which was published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* in 1905. Although Weber himself deemed the life span of a scientific text to last at most fifty years, this work is still taught and generates ongoing debates. In order to recapitulate its central points, it is useful to take as a point of departure the famous passage at the end when Weber talks about what Talcott Parsons translated—rather inadequately—as the iron cage, in German: *stahlhartes Gehäuse* (which could in my view better be translated as casing or perhaps shell, see also Kent 1983: 299, 313):

> In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. Since ascetism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideas in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious ascetism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. . . . No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self importance. (1920: 181-182)

The metaphor of the "iron cage" stands for the strict disciplinary regime to which modern subjects submit themselves, taking for granted that hard and efficient work and the resistance of pleasure is an absolute necessity. In comparison to the seventeenth-century Calvinists, who at least still understood hard work as a religious project that could reveal whether they belonged to the elected, in the early twentieth century when Weber wrote his text people have lost this religious dimension. In other words, the ethic propounded by Protestantism was necessary for the coming into being of modern Western capitalism, yet its religious basis was no longer

needed once it was in place. It is important to note that, far from playing the role of the apologetic of capitalism for which he sometimes has been mistaken, Weber speaks here in an utterly pessimistic, if not apocalyptic, mood about the world in the early twentieth century, and even lapses into rather dark prophecies that may be traced to Nietzsche (see also Peukert 1989). The passage, in short, invokes an overall sense of claustrophobia: being born and locked into a society that requires a mindset which, with hindsight, appears irrational and even foolish - and yet is irredeemably constitutive of one's identity.[4]

However, though touching upon features that are still recognizable to us today, Weber's account is also partial and incomplete because of its notable lack of attention paid to the symbiosis of consumption, desire and pleasure that seems to characterize capitalist life worlds. While Weber recognized, as the quote shows, that material goods wield power over people, the thrust of his analysis points towards Protestants' embracement of "innerworldly ascetism", that is, an attitude that privileges hard work and re-invests its fruits, rather than consuming them. However, looking around, we cannot help but realise that the success of capitalism depends as much on the consumers of commodities as on their producers. In his book, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), Colin Campbell called attention to exactly this question. Campbell's aim was not to refute the *Protestant Ethic*, but to offer a necessary complement. Focusing exclusively on innerworldly ascetism and the work ethics to which it gave rise, Weber overlooked the importance of consumption for the rise and perpetuation of capitalism. Reasoning along the lines set out by Weber, Campbell showed that next to the puritan ethic a romantic ethic emerged that eventually gave rise to the spirit of modern consumerism. This spirit makes people eagerly strive for new experiences out of dissatisfaction with what they have and who they are, espouse a hedonistic orientation and inexhaustibility of wants, and engage in ceaseless consumption of novelty. Having its roots in Methodism and Romanticism, the romantic ethic stood at the cradle of the modern consumer. Like the puritan ethic, the romantic ethic has been severed from the religious traditions that brought it about in the first place. Next to hard work, modern identity depends on consumption.

For Campbell the experience of capitalism can thus not be compressed into the iron cage. The puritan and the romantic ethic co-exist, making that "modern individuals inhabit not just an "iron cage" of economic necessity, but a castle of romantic dreams, striving through their conduct to turn the one into the other" (1987: 227). Campbell raises a very important point here, as, indeed, capitalism requires the expectant consumer, for whom buying and displaying goods is an inalienable element of self making, and thus part of a search for his/her authentic self. This stance has been globalized in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War in 1989 which marked the rise of a global culture of neo-liberalism that stresses the freedom of the person to consume (though not, of course, making this come true,

and thus viciously affirming the striving for personal freedom through consumption in many parts of the world) (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000).

It is hard to say whether the invocation of pleasure, desire, emotion, experience—all buzzwords which by themselves seem able to induce a warm feeling—might warrant a less pessimistic mood than that ventured by Weber. In any case, the power which consumer goods wield over people seems to operate rather undisturbed and non-coercively exactly because it uses the register of pleasure. In my view, Campbell's insistence that the puritan and the romantic ethic together form the Protestant ethic is convincing. As will be shown in Part II, this is all the more important in relation to PCCs, that accentuate consumption in the framework of the Prosperity Gospel.

The Protestant Ethic as a Model?

Before delving deeper into PCCs' theology of consumption, however, I need to point out a limitation in Weber's and Campbell's thinking about the role of religion in modern capitalism. Both take as a starting point that the religious roots that gave rise to the Protestant ethic have died off, in the sense that Protestant religion played the role of midwife in the birth of capitalism, but has since then lost its ground of existence in an increasingly disenchanted world. From a Weberian perspective, Protestantism basically forms a separate, relatively autonomous sphere that had its heydays long ago in allowing modernity to emerge, and has by now lost its job, leaving us oscillating between Weber's "iron cage" and its ethics of hard work and Campbell's romantic "dream castle" and its ethic and aesthetic of consumption. While there may have been good reasons for Weber and Campbell to take at face value the rise of secularism and disenchantment in modern Western society,[5] the global situation in which we find ourselves at the beginning of a new millennium questions their assumption. The public prominence of religion provokes us to ask what may be "the future of the religious past" and to answer this question in a way that grasps the apparent fusions between religion, politics, the market, and entertainment (e.g. De Vries 2008).

Given the salient popularity of PCCs and their apparently seamless association with the market in our time, it is no surprise that Weber's work is often invoked, especially by sociologists. In a lecture celebrating the centenary of the *Protestant Ethic*, Peter Berger has discussed the relevance of the *Protestant Ethic* to "understanding developments in the world today". The lecture's title, *Max Weber is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic Today*,[6] summarizes the gist of the argument: sustaining new attitudes geared towards what Weber called "this-worldly asceticism", Pentecostal churches in Latin America bear "a striking resemblance to their Anglo Saxon predecessors", in that they help generate a new, Protestant, economically productive middle class.[7] This view has also shaped a

current research project by the *Centre for Development and Enterprise* (CDE) on the potential social and economic role of Pentecostalism (here including the whole variety referred to the in Introduction) in South Africa, that involved a group of scholars, including Peter Berger. The report concludes that Pentecostalism generates "personal agency", implying a "more intense family life, working life, and business activities", and that, in turn, "[T]hese themes boil down to something approximating the central features of Calvinism, as described by Max Weber: a sense of purpose and therefore confidence in worldly engagement, strengthened by this-worldly ascetism" (2008: 25). Throughout the text certain reservations are made with regard to the most recent brand of Pentecostalism, with its strong emphasis on Prosperity Gospel and entrepreneurial pastors who run churches for profit. While the authors admit that this "tendency is apparently a major problem in some African countries" (2008: 8), at least in relation to South Africa they stick to a positive view on the social and economic impact of Pentecostalism.

Researchers working elsewhere in Africa do indeed suggest that current PCCs do not conform to Weber's model. In his book *Ghana's New Christianity*, Paul Gifford discusses the actions of present-day Pentecostals in the light of Weber's seventeenth-century Calvinists and critiques the former for failing to introduce a new work ethic at the expense of inducing consumerism (2004: 190ff.). While Berger thus refers to Weber so as to explain PCCs' success as a modernizing factor, Gifford dismisses such claims, and presents PCCs' endeavours as hampering development and progress. The fact that they come to opposed conclusions about the capacity of Pentecostalism to induce an ethic that is conducive for being successful in capitalism shows that it is problematic to make generalizing statements regarding PCCs' achievements. While the *Protestant Ethic* has a considerable heuristic value, scholars should be wary to take as a point of departure the assumption that current PCCs would mirror and confirm the Weberian model. In my view as an anthropologist, we rather need detailed investigations so as to find out to what extent particular PCCs actually act—and even more interestingly: do not act—as the successful mediators of a new ethics that makes people progress.

In my view, Berger and his co-researchers go a bit too far in their use of Weber. Analysing current Pentecostalism through the prism of *The Protestant Ethic*, they tend to use it as a model out of context. However, Weber's thesis concerned the rise of a new ethics through which capitalism emerged three hundred years ago. In our time, we need to examine the popularity of PCCs against the backdrop of the fact that by now capitalism is well in place. If it was Weber's concern to highlight the role of Protestantism in bringing about capitalism, today the question is more complicated, as it requires us to investigate not only how Pentecostalism facilitates capitalism (the causality analysed by Weber), but also how the latter shapes the former, and perhaps most importantly, how both are enmeshed. While Weber's famous thesis—and the supplement offered by Campbell—can certainly serve as a

source of inspiration, it should not be de-contextualized, because this may blind us to the specificity of the rise of especially the latest brand of PCCs at this particular historical moment.

Thus, in mobilizing Weber to help us understand the phenomenon of Pentecostalism today, we need to take as a point of departure the striking public relevance of religion in general, especially in what is called the global South, that seems to occur in the wake of the spread of neo-liberal capitalism. For far from retreating into the sphere of religion (in the sense of a relatively autonomous, semi-private realm), all over the world Pentecostals engage in instigating a Christian mass culture that inevitably gets caught up with the forces of entertainment. Spreading the message outside of the confines of the church renders Pentecostalism excessively visible and audible in public space, yet unavoidably, though perhaps unintentionally, at the same time entails what some Pentecostals lament as "watering down". In short, Pentecostalism appears to be entangled with the culture of neo-liberalism to such an extent, that it is impossible to still conceptually confine religion to a separate sphere (see also Comaroff n.d.), and investigate the relation between religion and economy in instrumental terms. As PCCs have not only embraced the logic of the market, but also form part of it, the enmeshment of religion and economy needs to be our starting point.

While the value of the *Protestant Ethic* as a model that governs our approach of PCCs is limited, it is all the same clear that Weber's search for elective affinities between religion and economy, and his insistence that the practical consequences of religious ideas need to be understood *via* a close examination of these ideas, are still inspiring. For Weber, religious faith, in the form of messages preached, lessons taught, and personal convictions held, is the necessary starting point for his analysis of the making of the modern subject. This approach governs the exploration to follow. By focusing on how Born Again faith materializes in the world, as well as the association of faith with the miracle of prosperity and the capacity to make visible God's larger plan with the help of new audiovisual media, I seek to highlight a set of central characteristics that suggest new directions for research in our study of the relation between Pentecostalism and capitalism.

II. Characteristics of PCCs

Pentecostal Faith and/in the "World"

The PCCs that gained popularity throughout Africa in the course of the last two decades or so are part of the Faith Movement and its global religious culture (Coleman 2002). Obviously, on the part of PCCs this does not entail the neglect of the local, but rather an attempt to ground the global in the local, at times involving a fierce spiritual war against—yet at the same time negative incorporation of—local

culture (Meyer 1999). In Ghana, in the aftermath of the turn to a democratic constitution, economic liberalization and the withdrawal of the state from control over the mass media, PCCs have become central factors in the country's public culture. Certainly in Southern Ghana, as Gifford has also shown (2004), there is a host of charismatic mega-churches, such as Mensa Otabil's *International Central Gospel Church*, Duncan William's *Action Faith Ministries*, Sam Korankye Ankrah's *Royal House Chapel*, Charles Agyin Asare's *World Miracle Church International*, Dag Heward-Mill's *Lighthouse Chapel International*, to name just the most prominent PCCs founded in Ghana. Next to these, many churches originally founded elsewhere (e.g. in Nigeria, the Unites States, or Brazil) are also active in Ghana. Though spreading into the country side, the true base of these multi-ethnic, transnational churches is the urban area, where they seek to build churches at prime locations (near shopping malls, bus stations and adjacent to main roads). They mainly address younger men and women, who strive to attain a modern life style, with middle class patterns of distribution and consumption. While it is difficult to attain reliable membership statistics, it is all the same clear that these churches are not only extremely media-conscious and make skilful use of modern technologies, but are also featuring as models that far extend the Pentecostal spectrum. While much could be (and has been) said about these churches (e.g. Asamoah-Gyadu 2005a; De Witte 2003, 2005; Hackett 1998; Van Dijk 2002), my concern in this article is to put forward some more central features that are shared even in broader Christian circles with an affinity for being Born Again.

Before turning to Pentecostal-charismatic understandings of faith, let me briefly recall that the notion of faith or belief—both terms are often used interchangeably—as we now understand it, is rooted in the Protestant Reformation.[8] With the emphasis on faith, the inner person became the privileged site of modern religion, and this implied that the relationship between inward experience and outward behaviour became problematic (Asad 1993). Privileging the inward above the outward gave rise to endless, at times desperate, meanderings about the authenticity and sincerity of faith and the fake nature of at first sight appropriate behaviour (hypocrisy) (see also Keane 2002).

Numerous studies point out that, in the context of missionary work in Africa, the opposition of inward and outward, which framed the modern Christian subject, was difficult to convey. Early Protestant mission churches encountered significant problems in introducing the notion of faith or belief to their African converts, for whom worship was more about ritual action involving an exchange between people and gods, and accessing the power to heal, protect, and possibly enrich. From an outsider perspective, the notion of faith, the stress on the inner person, the hope for individual salvation, the de facto often hypocritical denial of worldly matters appeared weird, if not irrational. These notions were popularized, though significantly reconfigured, through Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, as Isabel Hofmeyr

showed brilliantly in her book *The Portable Bunyan* (2003).

A century and half further, it is clear that faith, albeit its African version, has come to stay—so much so that many scholars think that the future of Christendom lies in Africa. In the PCCs which I encountered in Ghana, much emphasis is placed on being Born Again and the need to be faithful. A Born Again Christian is a person who, to rehearse the often called upon formula, "accepted Jesus Christ as his or her personal saviour". Accepting Jesus as a personal saviour often occurs as a consequence of an experience of conversion which may entail a dramatic renouncement of a person's previous link with the so-called "powers of darkness" and the Devil, or the realization that being baptized and a church member alone does not offer sufficient protection against malevolent forces. The Born Again believer is assured that s/he already has a special link with God, and can call upon the name of Jesus so as to be saved in situations of danger. As emphasized *via* sermons, radio talks, and also the Ghanaian and Nigerian video-films that surf along with the popularity of PCCs (Meyer 2004b), there is "power in the name of Jesus", and thus believers are advised to call out his name aloud in times of danger.

In marked contrast to Weber's desperate Calvinist who worries about his election and salvation and works hard out of despair, the Born Again Christian is assured that God materializes in his/her life and will ultimately bring prosperity. The sinful inner state of the believer as such is not a point of much worry, the trouble rather lies in the continuous experience of afflictions, from sickness to poverty, which prevent the Born Again believer from progressing in life. Over and over, people flock into the deliverance services and special prayer sessions offered by powerful charismatic pastors, who promise protection and healing via powerful prayers. Believers are urged to make offerings to the church (next to paying tithes), submit themselves to fasting and other religious disciplines, and to pray wherever they are, be it at home, in the market or at work. Born Again faith thus requires a propensity to give, ritual self-restraint (which does however not stand in the way of enjoying wealth), and an overall alert attitude.

Afflictions, it is asserted in sermons, testimonies, and confessions, often originate from jealous family members—the "witches in the village", as some pastors like to put it—or selfish colleagues who employ magic. How to get better protection against malevolent spiritual forces from outside, or to put it more sociologically, how to become immune to other person's negative intentions and actions—to develop a buffered self, as Charles Taylor (2007) puts it—is perceived to be the key problem. This may be seen as hinting at the existence of an alternative, more relational idea of the person, as basically and intrinsically connected and open to be influenced. By contrast, Christianity, and for that matter Pentecostalism, seems to offer the possibility of some sort of individualism and closure (Meyer 1999) on the basis of which a person becomes a member of a fellowship of Born Again believers. At the

same time, given the social-economic structure of Ghanaian society, a full separation from the extended family proves a virtually impossible option.

What is needed above all to create a strong, impermeable person is sound faith. How faith is conceived in these circles can be discerned from in a small booklet titled *Your Winning Confessions* (2000), in which the author Emmanuel Komla Gbordzoe presents four steps so as to embark on the "Road of Success". Step Three is called "Release Your Faith: Your Winning Key". Invoking Hebrews 11:1,"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see," the author states:

> Even though God has given you everything that you need for life, your physical eyes cannot see them because they are in the spirit realm waiting for you taking. *Your* faith however, can see them and be sure of them. *Your* faith can be certain of them. *Your* faith is both your spiritual eye and your spiritual hand. *Your* faith can see hope in the darkest circumstances of life. Your faith can defy the odds and press on to hope against hope (emphasis in original).

And:

> Your faith is your victory against the devil. Your faith is your stronghold. Maintain a spirit of faith. Make faith a lifestyle or your way of life. Put faith to action.

The section ends with the wonderful formula: "Your faith + The Word of God = Miracle." In this work, faith is not a matter of meandering about one's inner state, and the prospect of salvation after death. Faith is deliberately called upon so as to improve a person's situation in the world, to seize God's miracle. Faith, circumscribed as spiritual eye and spiritual hand, is a device, rather than an inner attitude, which promises the Born Again believer to be assured of God's blessings.

This brief exploration of faith highlights that Pentecostals have a different attitude towards "the world", than Weber's Calvinists and Puritans. For Pentecostals the "world" is not a compromising setting from which to shun away (apart from doing hard work)—as also taught by *Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress* or the lithography of the *Broad and the Narrow Path*—but one that requires action and transformation, even though this is full of difficulties and dangers. In the Pentecostal imaginary, the "world" is the site of a spiritual war between demonic forces, once upon a time cast out from heaven, and God (Englund 2004; Meyer 1999). These demonic forces stem from the old religious cults that a good Christian is supposed to leave behind, while at the same time the Devil also brings into being other demons that may lead people astray (a point to which I will turn below).

The fact that this is a *spiritual* war does not imply that it would not articulate in the material world. On the contrary, it does, yet extraordinary vision power—the spirit of discernment—is needed to see what goes on behind the surface of appearance. Hence the emphasis on pastors, prophets and believers who have the power to see, and the longing for a faith that offers a spiritual eye. This war affects every aspect of existence, and may well be felt down in one's own body, by persons who attribute their afflictions to being possessed by evil spirits and call upon the supreme power of the Holy Spirit. In the same way as bodies, also spaces, institutions or even whole countries are sites for the struggle between opposite forces. Concomitantly, salvation is to be achieved by a process of casting out evil through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. This is a purifying force that spreads like fire and rids spaces—within persons, on the level of their spirit, but also the secret interiors of business companies, markets, cities, or countries—of their uncanny, dangerous occupants.

In this imaginary, the "world" is not so much a setting characterized by mundane pleasures that seduce people onto the "broad path" that will eventually lead to hell, but a space in need of redemption. Pleasures and consumption are not problematic per se, their value depends on the question whether they stem from, and lead towards, God or the Devil. This entails a strong urge to transform the world, rather than shun away from it. Pentecostal cosmology is strongly oriented towards "world-making" (see also Droogers 2001; Robbins 2004), aiming at making the Holy Spirit materialize. This entails the construction of impressive church buildings with internal television circuits that can seat thousands of visitors, running high-tech media studios, setting up stores selling church-branded products, instigating social networks for mutual help and micro-credits, and even providing facilities for sports (some PCCs in Ghana now have their own gym). The way in which PCCs are managed has strong similarities with corporate business; generating income through tithes and fund-raising is considered part of the Christian mission, in the same way as believers are urged "to buy their future" (Otabil 2002). The success of these churches depends to a large extent on attracting a number of financially successful people, who support the church projects, whilst also featuring as living proofs of the capacity of the pastor to shower divine blessings on his people. This in turn induces members who are still poor and hope to unlock their miracle to make substantial contributions. In marked contrast to mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches, which expect members to attend church service on Sunday and pay their (comparatively small) dues, PCCs seek to place Born Again believers in a sound social setting that envelopes them totally, creating the foundation for their everyday lives. In so doing, PCCs are fully engaged in recreating the world in line with their plan for it.

In sum, the ethic that goes along with Born Again Faith is not at all geared to innerworldly *ascesis*. And even though fasting and other forms of self-restraint are considered important religious techniques, especially in times of crisis, Born Again Christians are not stuck in an "iron cage". These self-restraining techniques follow the

purpose to achieve health and wealth—to leave poverty behind. Concomitantly, the need to work hard is usually not framed as serving a religious purpose.[9] Many PCCs organize lengthy all-night prayers and weeks of (dry) fasting that may prove difficult to be combined with work. By and large, the Born Again ethic is oriented towards changing (and charging) the world with the power of prayer, as a result of which people, buildings, countries and even the world as whole will be governed by the Holy Spirit. Born Again believers' strong enmeshment with the "world" will stand central in the remainder of this article, focusing firstly on the Prosperity Gospel and consumption and secondly on the use of modern media.

Prosperity as Blessing versus Satanic Wealth

As pointed out already, the Prosperity Gospel forms one of PCCs' key appeals. Stating that believers are already blessed by God, even though this may not yet show materially, accentuates the material dimension of Born Again Christianity. Born Again Christians have a right to enjoy prosperity, including expensive consumer items, elegant clothes, a nice house and a flashy car, by the grace of God. Interestingly, the invitation to consume is not an indirect, unintentional consequence of a religious outlook geared towards the inner person, as claimed by Campbell, but a religiously legitimated practice which is guided by the model of the prosperous charismatic pastor and the wealthy people who support him. The spirit of consumerism, here, is not separated from its religious roots (as suggested by Campbell), but operates in a Pentecostal frame which views the world as enchanted, and in which spiritual control over invisible forces is found to be key to attain power.

We should note, however, that in line with the Pentecostal understanding of the world as a site of spiritual war, a marked distinction is made between riches from God or the Devil. The Pentecostal imaginary mobilizes two spirits of consumerism, the satanic and the divine, who compete with each other for influence in the world and who can only be handled and directed by spiritual means, and the power of prayer. As I tried to point out in earlier work (Meyer 1995), the suspicion of the accumulation of wealth as being satanic links up with zero-sum or "limited good" models which explain the increasing richness of one person in terms of a selfish, fatal exchange of life energy for money or wealth, which ultimately proves unproductive and dangerous. For instance, in Ghana stories about the man who spiritually sacrificed his wife in order to become rich are endlessly remediated in rumours, written booklets, movies such as the famous Nigerian video-films *Living in Bondage* (Nigeria 1992) and a more recent Ghanaian remake called *Stolen Bible* (Accra 2002) and of course in Pentecostal orally performed and written confessions and testimonies.[10]

The assertion that money and goods may have satanic origins coexists with the view of wealth and goods as divine blessings. Over and over again Born Again

Christians are reminded that their relationship with God comes down to a kind of gift exchange: paying tithes to their church and making special offertories at certain occasions will unlock a reverse stream of gifts from God. The affirmation that giving to God will provide divine blessings, of course, is reminiscent of the Devil contract, through which a person involves him/herself in an exchange relationship with an invisible power so as to become rich. The parallelism of satanic and divine wealth maps easily onto the strict dualism which structures the visible world according to Born Again believers. But the actual clarity suggested by this dualism appears to be easily blurred in real life. It is very difficult to tell on the basis of sheer appearance whether a person owes his/her wealth to a link with God or the Devil, the call upon the "spiritual eye" offered by faith notwithstanding. Actually, the display of exuberant wealth easily engenders rumours as to whether the person in question got it through acceptable means.

In recent years, I have noted an increasing amount of rumours about the wealth of church leaders. These rumours echo misgivings about the increasing number of pastors who run their church as a business, and over and over extract money from the members. Criticisms do not only come from outside of the Pentecostal spectrum, but also from within, stating that the services of all too money-minded pastors should be avoided, even though they may be seen as "spiritually strong". Such misgivings are expressed more elaborately in popular video-films—such as the Nigerian movie with the telling title *Church Bu$ine$$*—that feature a "satanic pastor" who owes his wealth and success to a contract with Satan and his local demons. It should be noted that rumours may translate back into real action, as in the case of the riots directed towards PCCs in South-Eastern Nigeria whose pastors were suspected of owing their position to links with the Devil (Smith 2001). The image of the satanic pastor, I would like to suggest, epitomizes the threat of the implosion of the Pentecostal distinction between divine and satanic and the difficulty to decide upon the true origin of accumulated goods.

I would like to propose that the circulation of rumours about satanic pastors stems from the fact that it proves difficult to convincingly authorize wealth as derived from God. This may all the more be the case, as many believers, though Born Again, do not make it in life, and despite giving tithes, do not prosper and experience continuing problems to make it through the day. For the Born Again believer who remains stuck in poverty, the question is not to seek signs revealing whether s/he belongs to the elected. The concern rather is the lack of material signs that display divine blessings, raising the question to whom the apparent blockage of wealth can be attributed. Regarding the happy few living in affluence, the question is whether their wealth truly signifies divine blessing. To charge things a bit, one could say that Born Again believers are made to oscillate between the dream of individual, ethically sound prosperity and the constant, utterly unsettling reminder of the difficulty to attain this. In other words, many Born Again Christians face a

gap between the emphasis on prosperity as a blessing from God that can be converted into tangible consumer items, and the frustrating experience of lack and loss. This is why the promise of prosperity forms not only Pentecostalism's main appeal, but may also prove to be its main weakness. It threatens to implode the Pentecostal message from within. This may even entail unleashing destructive energies replete with jealousy, as is the case, for instance, in the participation of Pentecostals in witchcraft accusations against old and young (De Boeck & Honwana 2005; see also Ashforth 2005).

Thus, seizing upon the consumerist possibilities offered by neo-liberal capitalism, Prosperity Gospel draws Pentecostals right into the "world". If for Weber's Calvinists work was framed as a religious duty, here the successful acquirement of consumer items is religiously legitimated as a sign of divine blessing. The always lurking possibility that consumer items, and wealth, do not derive from God and lead their owners astray, is an immediate consequence of Pentecostals' embracement of consumption as a blessing. This ambivalent ethics of wealth and consumption already haunts Pentecostal icons of success. It remains to be seen for how long PCCs prove able to advertise a Gospel of Prosperity that is unattainable for most members, who get ever more suspicious about the moral nature of wealth and consumption.

Mediating Vision, Making-Believe

Similar to the propagation of the Prosperity Gospel, Pentecostalism's techniques of spreading its message also entail a possibly corrupting closeness to the "world". Next to forming mega-churches that addresses masses of believers—and believers as a mass—many PCCs also organize large scale public events such as crusades and all-night prayers, which are often also broadcast on radio and TV. Pentecostal TV programs popularize a particular Pentecostal mode of worship with its own speech genres, music and dance, dressing style and way of comporting oneself—in short, a new religious aesthetic (Meyer 2006)—that contrasts significantly with the much more sober and less exuberant way of being a believer in Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian or Anglican churches. Announcing, in a self-assured manner, "break through" events, pastors engage in the production of miracles, through certain ways of speaking, dramatization and spectacularization.

What I find fascinating here is the way in which faith, seeing, and audio-visual media are brought together. While faith offers spiritual vision—"faith is your spiritual eye!"—visibility is also mobilized as evidence so as to persuade followers and potential believers of the pastor's power to perform miracles by calling upon God. During a visit to Ghana in 2003, for instance, there was much talk about a particular video tape, circulated by a Nigerian Pentecostal church, in which the pastor T. B. Joshua had been able to make a dead person, who had been brought to church in a coffin, rise from the dead. This video has been subject to as much admiration as critique

(Moyet n.d.). In April 2004, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation banned the broadcasting of this kind of miracles on TV and radio because, as it was put, the pastors were unable to verify them. The reactions on the part of those defending the broadcasting of these miracles were very interesting. As expected, it was argued that faith exceeds reason, but it was also claimed that the NBC itself failed to offer scientific standards for providing evidence. Perhaps most interestingly, it was claimed that the ban violated the constitutional right of freedom of religious expression. The popularity of such programs shows—albeit in extreme form—how Pentecostals engage in different audio-visual techniques of make-believe so as to feature as successful and make others believe.

The performance of miracles and the celebration of vision—consonant with the adage that seeing is believing—draws contemporary Pentecostalism close to the realm of entertainment and audiovisual media such as video, TV and radio which have become widely accessible in the aftermath of many African countries' turn to democracy and the liberalization and commercialization of hitherto state-controlled media. Although the danger of "watering down" the Gospel in the process of spreading it outside of the confines of the churches to a broad public is acknowledged and a matter of debate, it seems that nothing can stop Pentecostalism's incorporation of, as well as by, the mass media. Yet, as the expression of misgivings also suggests, it is difficult to employ mass media in merely instrumental terms, that is, making them simply subordinate to the Pentecostal project of expressing a particular message.

While audio-visual media seem to easily fit into Pentecostal mediation practices, in that the emphasis on having vision and the use and command of audio-visual technologies appear to reinforce if not require each other, these technologies refuse to be naturalized as mere instrumental devices that will not affect the message. For mass media, as Marleen de Witte also shows in her study of the ICGC (2003, 2008; see also Asamoah-Gyadu 2005b), also entail a logic of their own. The force of the program format (requiring a particular timing, a particular attentive audience, a miracle at the right time), as well as the seemingly endless reproduction of an overwhelming, dazzling number of images spread out into public space, does justice to Pentecostalism's striving to reach out into the world by publicly displaying its miraculous power.

By employing modern audio-visual technologies in conveying the performance of miracles so as to make people believe, religion and technology come to be entangled in a striking way. As Derrida put it provocatively in his discussion of the nexus of television and the religious: "There is no need any more to believe, one can see. But seeing is always organized by a technical structure that supposes the appeal to faith" (2001: 63). Far from occupying different provinces, religion and technology, miracle and special effects, as Hent de Vries (2001) also argued, no longer appear as ontologically different but as mixed. By calling upon audio-visual technologies and

making belief dependent on visibility, PCCs are prime examples of this process, adopting new media formats that apparently thrive in a neo-liberal environment which they vest, in term, with belief.

By the same token, these churches face the difficulty of being sucked into the forces of entertainment. Pentecostalism spreads, indeed, on the surface of social life and, calls for the need to become a completely new person notwithstanding, tends to be caught up in the logic of mass reproduction. The mass format, entailing serialization and mediatization, certainly is one of the conditions of possibility to feature as a public religion, however, at the cost of dispersal and distraction (both notions are well captured in the German term *Zerstreung*, as Walter Benjamin [1977] also argued). In this sense, the claim to reveal truth—to make visible what the spiritual eye of faith can discern—is thwarted by the very modes through which the promise is articulated. And although the broadcasting of the miracle is presented as the ultimate "truth event", the serial, excessive reproduction of miracles threatens to subvert this promise.

Conclusion

The central theme of this article has been the often noted consonance between the rising appeal of PCCs and the spread of neo-liberal capitalism. I have argued against using Weber's famous *Protestant Ethic* as a model to analyze current PCCs. Instead, I have advocated to take it as a stimulating departure point through which we can above all become alert to significant differences between the era to which the *Protestant Ethics* refers (as well as the time in which it was written) and the current the role and place of Pentecostalism in Africa. My brief exploration in Part II has shown that, in contrast to Weber's analysis discussed in Part I, PCCs are not confined to a separate, relatively autonomous realm that is losing ever more ground to the secular realms of politics and the market. On the contrary, Pentecostal Christianity has become enmeshed with the neo-liberal environment into which it seeks to spread, the opportunities of which it seeks to seize, and upon whose devices its spread depends. The classical Protestant striving of "being in the world" yet not "being of the world" is hardly applicable here. As we saw, PCCs embrace and seek to transform the "world", seizing the consumerist possibilities and media technologies offered by neo-liberal capitalism. Consumption is as much an inalienable part of the ideal Born Again believer as is the use of media technologies for spreading the message.

Having reached a point at which organized religion has left its niche and operates within the sphere of the market and media, as Jean Comaroff also states, we witness "a shift from the division of institutional labour captured in signal modernist accounts, like the Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism" (n.d.: 7). This makes it ever more difficult to state where religion stops and begins. Much can therefore

be said in favour of Walter Benjamin's proposition to view "capitalism as religion" (2005).[11] Putting Weber on his head, so to speak, Benjamin suggests that capitalist consumer culture itself has developed into a new kind of undogmatic cult worshipping the "secret God of debt". Against the background of my exploration in Part II, we can safely conclude that PCCs offer key resources in this cult (for a comparative view on Vietnam see Salemink 2003). However, the concern to be an outreaching, public religion that bestows divine blessings on its followers carries at its flipside the spectre of the implosion of the possibility to maintain a distinction between religion and the world out there. This erosion of a distinction between religion and the world, making (in Benjamin's terms) capitalism *become* religion, ultimately questions the existence of separate religious organizations. If religion is everywhere, it may be nowhere. So, paradoxically, what looks like the upsurge of religion may also yield its diffusion.

As I have argued, PCCs' easy embracement of consumerism and mass culture is the source of its popularity and its main vulnerability. This has important implications for ongoing research on PCCs. Researchers of Pentecostalism often invoke the language of coping so as to explain Pentecostalism's popularity, claiming that this religion helps people address their problems, or make them socially upward mobile because of certain, partly unintended effects of the religious ethic propounded. The problem with the assumption that religion is there to help believers acquire an orientation so as to enable them to solve their daily problems in the world and move up is that it views religion as somehow posited outside of this world. As a consequence, on the basis of this view it is difficult to acknowledge the extent to which Pentecostalism is entangled with the logic and appearance of neo-liberalist capitalism. This view is too much steeped in the (at least in my view increasingly problematic) distinction between religion and other spheres, such as the market, that also forms the background to Weber's and Campbell's analysis, yet has proven inadequate with regard to PCCs in our age.

I would not deny PCCs' capacity to help members alleviate their predicaments and the possibility of an unintended impact of its ethics on social and economic behaviour. However, I suggest this positive, constructive view does not convey the whole story, and needs to be supplemented with a more distant perspective that has an eye for PCCs' limits. Could it not be that it is exactly the elective affinity between Pentecostalism and neo-liberal capitalism that allows us to grasp Pentecostalism's internal contradictions? Part II of this article tried to show that by scrutinizing Pentecostalism, albeit in its most articulate and extreme form, we enter a minefield rife with paradoxes and ambivalences. Current Pentecostalism's greatest challenge immediately stems from its successfulness: how to make up for the failure to fulfil the promise of prosperity, leaving people to meander between hope and frustration, and to stay immune from the profanity of the world into which the message is enmeshed. This entails a rather messy process through which religious forms and

elements get entangled with an audio/visual mass culture, in which belief has increasingly come to depend on visibility, and which offers ingenious modes of make-believe thriving on enchantment, illusions, special effects.

How PCCs will face the high risk of being haunted by their own successful message and subverted by the very forces they built upon is difficult to predict. This should be one of the prime areas of future investigation. Given the strong appeal of the dream of prosperity in a world replete with economic hardship for the majority of people, it is likely that PCCs, though organized around a paradox of strength and vulnerability, will remain a major force in the making of modern subjects who are caught between hoping for pleasure and feelings of frustration and despair. For the time being, it seems that there is as much reason to succumb to the popularity of Pentecostalism as to unmask and discard it out of disappointment. As scholars we need to pay close attention to this ambivalence.

Notes

[1] Earlier versions of this article were presented at the *Reasons of Faith* conference, Wiser and Goethe-Institute, Johannesburg, (October 2005), the VU seminar on Conversion careers (November 2005) and the Centre for the Study of Religion, Princeton University (April 2006). I would like to thank in particular Marleen de Witte, André Droogers, Peter Geschiere, John Hyslop, Miranda Klaver, Achille Mbembe, Mattijs van de Port, Rafael Sanchez, Regien Smit , Rijk van Dijk and Jojada Verrips for stimulating comments on earlier versions and David Chidester for his encouragement to transform this lecture into a publication. This article stems from a broader research project on "Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities", which has been generously funded by the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research (NWO) between 2000 and 2006; see www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion.

[2] According to the website of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "at least a quarter of the world's 2 billion Christians are thought to be members of these lively, highly personal faiths, which emphasize such spiritually renewing 'gifts of the Holy Spirit' as speaking in tongues, divine healing and prophesying" (www.pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal, consulted on 8 April 2008). With regard to Africa, it is stated that "[a]ccording to recent figures from the World Christian Database, pentecostals now represent 12%, or about 107 million, of Africa's population of nearly 890 million people. This includes individuals who belong to classical pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God or the Apostolic Faith Mission, that were founded in the early twentieth century, as well as those who belong to pentecostal denominations or churches that have formed more recently, such as the Deeper Life Bible Church in Nigeria. Charismatic members of non-pentecostal denominations, who in Africa are drawn mainly from Catholic and Protestant churches and African Instituted Churches (AICs), number an additional 40 million, or approximately 5% of the population."Taken together, this means that in 2005 16.6 % (146.9 million people) of Africa's population were pentecostal-charismatic. See http://pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/africa, consulted 8 April 2008.

[3] Anderson distinguishes between Classical Pentecostals, Older Church Charismatics (remaining within the Catholic, Anglican or Protestant churches), Older Independent and Spirit Churches (including African Independent Churches), and Neo-Pentecostal and Neo-charismatic churches. My interest in this article pertains to churches in the latter group. Since it remains unclear to me what is entailed by the expression "neo", which suggests pentecostal or charismatic as core categories, from which certain present-day expressions of Pentecostalism are found to divert (hence the "neo"), I prefer to circumscribe them as PCCs.

[4] It seems that this resonates with his own take on life in the beginning of the twentieth century, as also laid out in Joachim Radkau's marvellous biography *Max Weber: Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* (the passion of thinking) (2005). Peter van Rooden (1996) has critiqued Weber for presenting seventeenth- century Calvinism on terms that reflect an understanding of Protestantism that only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which is indebted to Schleiermacher.

[5] The view of modern society as secularized and disenchanted is subject to much debate. In my view, the assumption of secularization being an intrinsic feature of modernization is problematic. Instead, the rise of the categories of secular and religious needs to be seen as co-constitutive (Asad 2003). This generates a different kind of question than a mere focus on secularization, entailing a shift from focusing on the supposed "decline" of religion towards its "reconfiguration" (see also Taylor 2007). The question of disenchantment, a term Weber borrowed from Schiller, is even more complicated. In his critique of commodity fetishism, Marx already pointed at the enchanted dimension of capitalism, through which the products of labour are sublimated as objects of desire, that far exceed their true nature. In this sense, modern society has never been truly disenchanted.

[6] http://www.economyandsociety.org/events/Berger_paper.pdf

[7] This echoes Berger's earlier statement, made in the Preface to David Martin's *Tongues of Fire*: "They [the social and moral consequences of Pentecostal conversion] are, when all is said and done, the components of what Weber called the 'Protestant ethic'; what is more, now as then, the ethos of Protestantism shows itself to be remarkably helpful to people in the throes of rapid modernization and of the 'take-off' stage of modern economic growth" (1990: ix).

[8] In German, the term *Glaube* encompasses belief and faith. Luther, positing that *Glaube* is a gift by God's grace, stressed the 'inward totality of Christian belief, the faith of the believer' and articulated a new notion of the person as experiencing intensive inward conflicts, struggles and—more rarely—pleasures. Calvin, as Weber pointed out, sharpened the issue by denying the possibility to gain certainty about one's salvation through emotions, by feeling close to God. For Calvin, faith had to prove itself through its objective effects. Certainty about salvation could only be revealed in believers' appropriate mode of conduct in the world, not through any sacraments as was the case with Catholicism, and still partly for Luther. Good works were signs of election, but election could never be achieved by means of good works. This position, as Campbell argues, was modified into a methodological observation of the inner self, geared to finding signs for a person's elected state and future salvation by scrutinizing emotions. Methodism and Pietism deployed a doctrine of signs, with melancholy and longing for death featuring as outward signs of godliness and proof of election.

[9] Mena Otabil is a notable exception here. In contrast to his charismatic colleagues who indulge in the register of spiritual warfare, Otabil stresses that Born Again Christians need to pray and work, handle their finance wisely, and not squander money for luxurious things before they have established capital (for instance, buying land).

[10] Another example concerns the bestseller *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness*, by the Nigerian Assemblies of God pastor Emmanuel Eni (1988), who preached throughout Africa (including South Africa in 1994 and 1995; Anderson 2005). In this text, Eni reveals his contacts with the 'Queen of the Coast', reminiscent of Mami Water, in her city of affluence at the bottom of the ocean. She seeks to cast her spell even on Born Again Christians, by using perfumes, shining materials, jewellery and other desired consumer items. This book has offered a prime source of inspiration for

Pentecostal preachers, who started to point to the possibly enchanted nature of goods, and urged their audiences to pray over them so as to break the spell (Meyer 1998).

[11] Benjamin stated: "One can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. The proof of capitalism's religious structure—as not only a religiously conditioned construction, as Weber thought, but as an essentially religious phenomenon—still today misleads one to a boundless, universal polemic" (Benjamin 2005: 259).

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