CHAPTER ELEVEN

ANOTHER END OF HISTORY

Eschatology, Conspiracy Theories, and Global Imagination

Like many other Pentecostals around the world, congregants from the EPC see global processes and world history as saturated with diabolical forces. Pentecostal understandings of spiritual warfare not only inform interpretations of many of the challenges and misfortunes of everyday life, as described in the previous chapter. Spiritual warfare also occupies a central position in a Pentecostal eschatological metanarrative within which world historical events and global processes are integrated as episodes or parts.

Eschatology, the theological concern with the end of the world and the final events in history, forms part of official Pentecostal teachings in the EPC as in other Pentecostal churches. In this chapter I explore eschatological readings of world history. And I attempt to demonstrate how Pentecostal historical awareness and global orientations are to a large extent constituted and shaped by the less-official eschatological subgenres of rumour and conspiracy theories. These subgenres belong to what I have earlier described as the third level of Pentecostal discourse (see chapter 2). They only circulate in private contexts and never find their way into sermons, Sunday school lessons, or homilies directed to potential converts on the street. Positioning Pentecostals as persecuted victims of globally stretching satanic conspiracies, these genres tend to follow a paranoid style of thought, defined by the American historian Richard Hofstadter as a ‘way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself’ in which ‘the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy’ (1965: 4). Hofstadter adds that ‘the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures of ambiguities’ (ibid.: 36). Drawing on the work of Hofstadter in a study of religious conflict in Nigeria, Nils Kastfelt sees the paranoid style as providing ‘a master story which unites visible and invisible forces into a unified, coherent and all-embracing pattern’ (2005: 45). In the case of the EPC this master story is about God trying to unfold
his plan of salvation and Satan trying to sabotage it and gain world
dominion for himself. Within this broad storyline of sacred forces
struggling against each other there is plenty of room for human actors
and institutions. As will be shown, Pentecostal rumours and conspir-
acy theories present the Catholic Church, North American enterprises,
cartoons, and the internet as the allies or instruments of the Devil. The
role of Pentecostals is that of persecuted victims of global conspiracies.
They further see themselves as allies of God and, very importantly,
as activators of his transformative power that will ultimately secure victory
and prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ, the Reign of the
Millennium, and the Great Day of Judgment, though the road may be
long and bumpy.

In the scholarly literature popular conspiracy theories and other
rumours are often portrayed as forms of subaltern communication that
are distinguished from other discourses by being authorless, anonym-
ous, ambiguous, opaque, and network-like in their circulation (Guha
1983; Spivak 1987; Scott 1990; Coombe 1997). In Homi Bhabha’s view,
the indeterminate circulation of meaning as rumour or conspiracy
constitutes an intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance (1994:
200). As they have no signature or origin and do not belong to anyone,
rumours are difficult to control and dispute, but at the same time they
constitute powerful and pervasive cultural narratives, which articulate
an alternative version of social reality and reshape the world as well as
the place of the subject within it (Bubandt 2002: 4).

In what follows I explore how rumours, conspiracy theories, and
more generally the eschatological metanarrative that informs these
genres allow Pentecostals to symbolically reposition themselves in the
social world while at the same time constitute a sense of global spiritual
agency. In addition to the literature on rumour, sketched above, the
analysis I pursue is inspired by a recent body of literature focusing on
Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity from a global perspective. Several
scholars have demonstrated how Pentecostal-charismatic organiza-
tions socialize their adherents into a specifically global orientation
(Coleman 2000; Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001; Lindhardt 2010,
2011). Thus Birgit Meyer argues that Pentecostalist churches in Ghana
take their members beyond the scope of local culture by placing more
emphasis than other churches on their being a world religion (1999b:
159–60). In a similar vein Ruth Marshall-Fratani points to the ability of
Nigerian Pentecostalism to create new moral, physical geographies and
global imagined communities (2001: 82–4). Pentecostal subjectivity,