CHAPTER 11

Encoding Caesar’s Realm – Variants of Spiritual Warfare Politics in Africa

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The political imaginaries of Pentecostals have vitalized current explorations of the relationship between religion and politics in sub-Saharan Africa. A combination of factors such as the presence of Pentecostal rhetoric and imagery in the African mass media; the efficiency and range of Pentecostal transnational networks; the pervasive Pentecostal semantics of “winning” a nation “for Christ” and experiments of social action by intercessory ministries has inspired scholars of African religion to rethink classical notions of politics. Referring to the increased visibility of Pentecostal Christianity in the region Birgit Meyer has proposed to speak of a “Pentecostalization of public sphere(s)” in Africa (Meyer 2011:158), and in virtually paradigmatic terms Harri Englund has attempted a conceptual reorientation “from politics to publics” (Englund 2011:6–9). Although “publics” is still a tentative theoretical concept it bears significant analytical consequences in view of the socio-political design of Pentecostal theology and belief. What Englund suggests is that the political dimensions of African Pentecostalism should be studied within an analytical framework of public spheres and not just of institutionalized politics. Rather than focusing on Pentecostal participation in electoral politics, scholars should pay attention to the Pentecostal habitus of “going and making public” (Meyer 2011).1 Ruth Marshall’s study on the southern Nigerian Pentecostal movement (2009) is an example of such a redirection of research focus. Her core argument links Pentecostal “techniques of the self” (a concept she takes from Michel Foucault) to political spiritualities. The Pentecostal “techniques of the self” refer to idioms of born-again identity and conduct, such as bodily asceticism, fasting, prayer, individual witnessing and other practices of self-examination. What Marshall argues is that such aspects of

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1 Englund (2011) as well as Meyer (2011) refer to Jürgen Habermas’ writings on public sphere (“Öffentlichkeit”). The focus on Pentecostalism and political culture or the public sphere is remarkably absent in the interdisciplinary volume on methods and themes in the study of global Pentecostalism, edited by Anderson, Bergunder, Droogers and van der Laan (2010). The avoidance of the question of a political relevance of Pentecostalism is in my view the most elementary lacuna in this otherwise extremely valuable resource book as this aspect has inspired a long research tradition and a multi-dimensional theory production.
individual conversion and ongoing cultivation of a born-again self may expand into a deliberate call for intervention in public affairs.

Marshall’s approach to potential Pentecostal interferences in postcolonial African political life is that of a political scientist and scholar of religion. By contrast, the Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong offers an insider’s perspective on a genuine Pentecostal “political theology.” Yong was brought up in a Pentecostal environment (the Assemblies of God) in which “being Pentecostal and being political were [seen as] contradictory” (Yong 2010:xvii). His interest in political theology was born after the events of 11 September 2001. Based on in-depth studies of the history of Pentecostalism, Yong’s book “In the Days of Caesar” (2010) is written with a threefold aim: it contains a self-reflective critique of widespread Pentecostal ideals of political quiescence; it further reviews external (scholarly) portrayals of Pentecostalism as an inherently a-political religion. Finally, the book aims at contributing to wider discussions about Christian political theologies. Contrary to widespread assumptions about Pentecostalism, Yong sustains that there is, in fact an inherent political dimension in Pentecostal theologizing and identity. He tries to develop a particular Pentecostal political theology as an alternative vision of *civitas* and *polis*. In doing so he refers to the communal practices of early followers of Jesus (as described in the Gospel of Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles) as exemplary sources of inspiration for Pentecostals attempting to make a difference in the world. In Yong’s view, the role of the Pentecostal church must be that of an “alternative *polis* to the dominant world order” (Yong 2010:112). Whether or not Yong’s church centred construction of a Pentecostal political theology is sustainable remains open for debate. But what is worth noticing in the present context is that his emphasis on both *civitas* and *polis* brings the level of institutionalized politics back into the discussion of Pentecostal political theology. In other words, Pentecostal political practice includes both insertions into the public sphere and transformations on governance levels (see also Heuser 2012:302). Furthermore, Yong identifies a variety of Pentecostal political engagements. Among other things he points to political dimensions and implications of Pentecostal theologies and practices of spiritual warfare (Yong 2010:129–133). Yong notes that the biblical worldview that informs the theology and practice of Pentecostals is an elaboration of a “conviction about the gods of the nations being equivalent, primordially, with fallen angels” (ibid:130). For contemporary Pentecostals, he continues, spiritual warfare against territorial spirits consists in large part in “identifying spiritual strongholds over specific geographic territories, cultural regions, or national governments or institutions” (ibid.). This kind of spiritual warfare can be seen as a proactive agenda of “countering the political effects of alleged spiritual entities” (ibid.).