

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

John F. McCauley

Subject: Groups and Identities, Political Values, Beliefs, and Ideologies, World Politics

Online Publication Date: Aug 2019 DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1379

Summary and Keywords

Charismatic Pentecostalism constitutes perhaps the most important contemporary movement in sub-Saharan Africa, combining extremely rapid growth with an informal political presence. The movement has expanded in Africa by bringing traditional spirituality into a modern setting, offering social and economic hope to both the upwardly mobile and the destitute. Despite having minority status, its messages of pending prosperity and spiritual warfare, and its astute exploitation of mass media, have positioned the Charismatic Pentecostal movement to exert important if informal influence on politics in the region. It is reshaping the channels through which resources flow from Big Men to their followers; it is implicating new and different international actors; and it is allowing followers to live fully within the church through the provision of social services. Perhaps most importantly, the movement has introduced language of national identity—of good and evil, and Christian nations—that captivates just as it divides. Its potential to influence the formal politics of institutions and parties is limited by the absence of organizational hierarchy and a central focus on remaking the individual rather than addressing social injustices. Nevertheless, by informal means, the movement has “Pentecostalized” politics in many African countries.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, prosperity, deliverance, Big Man, informal politics, spiritual warfare, African politics

Introduction

In much of sub-Saharan Africa, it is customary for representatives from various faith and cultural traditions to be invited as guests of honor to important public ceremonies, such as Independence Day festivals and inaugurations. It is also customary for representatives of traditional African religions to pour libations in honor of ancestors and deities during such events.

The pouring of libations has long been viewed, and accepted, as a reflection of the melding of traditional norms with more contemporary contexts: alongside presidents in Western suits, priests and imams of national standing, and masters of ceremony manipulating modern sound systems, a traditional chief pays public homage to the spirits of those who passed before in an exercise reflective of the values central to rural, customary, and

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

agrarian African life. Yet, what was at worst viewed as a quaint display of ancestral affection has become, in the era of sweeping Charismatic Pentecostalism in Africa, a matter of public dispute tinged with political meaning. In places such as Ghana and Malawi, new Pentecostal leaders have vocally refused to share the stage with those who pour libations and have called for an end to the practice (Meyer, 2003; Van Dijk, 2002).

More than a petty dispute over ceremonial practices, the libations row may be viewed as a microcosm of the place of Pentecostalism in African politics today: the breaking from the past, the centrality of Pentecostal leaders, the aggrandizing of moral policies, and the informal shaping of national identities and priorities. Despite its quickly expanding size, strength, and informal power, however, the new Pentecostal movement's influence over formal politics in the region is far from clear or decided. While Pentecostals are gradually emerging as the winners in the libations dispute (Van Dijk, 1999), it is fair to ask just how far-reaching their political power might be.

This article offers an overview of the politics of Pentecostalism in Africa. Having emerged in the latter part of the 20th century as perhaps the most powerful contemporary movement in the region, Pentecostalism's influence on daily life in many countries is difficult to overstate. Yet there are also reasons why its political role remains ambiguous, even as it reshapes so much of social life. To characterize the complex interplay between politics and Pentecostalism, the article begins by outlining the emergence and character of the new Pentecostal movement in the region. It then considers a number of ways in which Pentecostalism influences African politics informally, such as through patronage networks, service provision, international ties, and national identity. From there, the article explores the more formal place for Pentecostalism in African politics and outlines the structural features of the new Pentecostal movement that call into question its capacity to transform formal political institutions, parties, and power in the region. In the end, Pentecostalism's political impact may be limited, but if one is to view informal networks and national identity as equally important to the formal institutions of power, it would be fair to conclude that politics in parts of Africa have indeed been "Pentecostalized" (Heuser, 2014).

The Emergence and Character of the New Pentecostal Movement

To understand the power of Pentecostalism in Africa, it is important first to understand *which* Pentecostalism is at issue. In fact, waves of Pentecostalism have emerged on the continent only to dissipate or transform and make way for subsequent movements. As Anderson (2004) describes, the Pentecostal movement that began in Los Angeles in 1906 made its way to Africa first in the form of the classical Pentecostal churches, such as the Church of Pentecost, the Apostolic Church, and the Assemblies of God; those churches were Western-originating missionary churches with emphasis on spirit baptisms and speaking in tongues. Also influenced by Pentecostalism in the first half of the 20th century but otherwise distinct from the established Pentecostal churches were the African In-

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

dependent Churches. The AICs, sometimes known as “churches of the Spirit” (Anderson, 2014, p. 67), emphasized healing, spiritual gifts, and prophecy in the manner of the classical churches but also integrated traditional African beliefs, local leadership, and greater informality. Then, beginning approximately in the 1970s, the neo-Pentecostal or Pentecostal Charismatic movement began to take root. Consisting of many different independent churches, the new Pentecostal movement has become a face of modern Africa, uniting experiential worship of the spirit with contemporary modes of communication and presentation, often in megachurches such as Winners Chapel in Nigeria, Christian Action Faith Ministries in Ghana, and Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries in Zimbabwe (Meyer, 1998). Such has been their influence that the mainline Catholic and Protestant denominations in Africa have begun to foster their own charismatic revivalist movements, yet the strength of the movement has come from the loose collection of new independent, Charismatic Pentecostal churches.

Churches in the new Pentecostal movement are recognizable by a number of features. They prioritize personal relationships with God through the gifts of spirit worship, prophecy, healing, and glossolalia (Sperber & Hern, 2018). Members break from their pasts (Meyer, 1998), and some version of faith gospel—that every born-again Christian is entitled to divine blessings of health and wealth here in this lifetime—permeates the practice (Lindhardt, 2014). Truths are absolute (Comaroff, 2009), yet leadership is individualized; Pentecostal pastors typically have little formal or expected training and the movement lacks hierarchy or organizational structure (Anderson, 2014). In Africa in particular, Charismatic Pentecostalism represents the terrain of the young, with ebullient, energized worship services whose appeal has now spread to other demographics (Meyer, 2007).

Two themes stand out in new Pentecostal teaching. On one hand, Charismatic Pentecostal churches in Africa place emphasis on deliverance from evil. Deliverance ministries emphasize the bodily experience and attempt to overcome satanic influence through exorcisms or intense prayer (Heuser, 2014). This struggle of good over evil constitutes a centerpiece of the “spiritual warfare” language that so frequently influences contemporary political discourse in heavily Pentecostal countries: Christian worship, in this context, is defined as a fight against evil forces and a battle against the power of Satan (Meyer, 2007). On the other hand, some new Pentecostal churches in Africa prioritize the prosperity gospels. Born-again Pentecostals are taught that their faith in the spirit entitles them to the blessings of wealth and health, and that prayer will eventually bring good fortune (Anderson, 2014). Marshall (1993) notes that new Pentecostal churches tend to lie somewhere along a spectrum between deliverance and prosperity, often blending the two in language linked to personal salvation.

The Dramatic Spread of Pentecostalism

This new brand of Pentecostalism has swept across much of sub-Saharan Africa. Estimates suggest that Pentecostal and evangelical renewalists now account for perhaps a third of African Christians in many countries south of the Sahara (Sperber & Hern, 2018), and up to half the population in some places (Pew, 2006). University students and post-

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

graduate associations often serve as catalysts for churches (Maxwell, 2000), and converts come from mainline denominations, traditional religions, and, as in some well-publicized instances, Islam (Lindhardt, 2014). Older family members increasingly take cues from younger Pentecostal relatives, and a new generation of children is now being raised in the Charismatic Pentecostal movement.

Why the Pentecostal movement emerged with such force in Africa has been the subject of considerable debate. Numerous scholars underscore the role of the political economic context in the growth of new Pentecostalism. As Marshall (2009) notes with specific reference to Nigeria, the movement gained strength in the period of political breakdown and economic crisis in the 1970s, when coups and insurmountable debt became staples of the African political economy. In this context, the Charismatic Pentecostal movement offered a message of hope to those facing potentially painful social and economic conditions (Maxwell, 1998). The democratic multipartyism that followed in many African states, in the aftermath of the Cold War and political crisis, further opened the institutional space that independent churches coveted to pursue members and agendas with less oversight either from a central church or the state (Heuser, 2014). Crisis and disruption in the late stages of the 20th century played their own roles in the spread of Pentecostalism in Africa, as individuals in post-genocide Rwanda (Kubai, 2007) and crisis-afflicted Democratic Republic of Congo (Demart, 2013) sought opportunities to break from the past and adopt alternative religious messages.

Of course, the political-economic context might explain why Charismatic Pentecostalism has swept across much of the developing world, including Latin America and Asia in addition to Africa (see Miller, Sargent, & Flory, 2013). Ogbu Kalu (2008) stresses a second, Afrocentric explanation for Pentecostalism's success in the region: that just as new Pentecostals seek a complete break from the past as born-again Christians, so too do they recognize the similarities between their newfound beliefs and long-standing traditional African religious norms. In effect, new Pentecostalism provides traditionally familiar spiritual beliefs—from dreams and omens to the threat of evil occult powers (Meyer, 1998)—in a modern guise. The new brand of Pentecostalism in Africa, for all its modern flair, thus has local roots that resonate profoundly with the African spiritual approach to life (Ellis & ter Haar, 2001). As Lindhardt (2014) suggests, Charismatic Pentecostalism's influence in Africa has been so remarkable in large part because it is both modern and “makes a good deal of cultural sense” to people (p. 28).

Third, the Pentecostal themes of prosperity and deliverance themselves help to explain its widespread appeal to Africans, resonating with two very distinct audiences on different sides of the socioeconomic divide (Comaroff, 2014). On one hand, Pentecostal churches minister to the elite and upwardly mobile, their messages of individual agency and prosperity attracting the modern and ambitious of character. Conversely, they also offer hope to the destitute, and a set of guidelines for avoiding evil and escaping poverty (Maxwell, 1998). Thus, whereas its roots in Africa are largely urban, new Pentecostalism has proven

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

equally attractive to those simply enamored of the promise that urban life holds, even in decidedly rural settings, which has further contributed to its spread.

The Social Character of Pentecostalism

Pentecostals in Africa are a breed apart, fairly easy to recognize not so much in appearance but in lifestyle, and in ways that help to shape the informal political power of the movement.

First, central to the African Pentecostal lifestyle is a dedication to the remaking of the individual, emphasizing strong family values and moral character (Maxwell, 1998). New Pentecostals tend to prioritize the importance of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family, a noteworthy departure from traditional norms that place the individual in a much wider family context (Meyer, 1998). A modern nuclear family free from moral vices and traditional obligations is thought to be beneficial to both women and the younger adults in the church. Pentecostals also often refrain publicly from alcohol consumption, with vocal encouragement from church leadership (Van Dijk, 2002). Van Dijk (2002) argues that the rigid rejection of alcohol is not simply a matter of moral rectitude but also constitutes an additional means of breaking from the traditional past: consumption of locally made alcoholic beverages is perceived as commonplace in rural contexts, among the older population, and in association with ancestral ceremonies. Thus, in teetotaling, new Pentecostals can break free from gerontocratic structures and assert their rejection of tradition in favor of a modern lifestyle (Van Dijk, 2002), though drinking alcohol may certainly persist among some Pentecostals or in private settings.

Second, the social character of Charismatic Pentecostalism is encompassing and total for its adherents. Time not spent in bars becomes available for prayer meetings, choir, and church events (Van Dijk, 2002). Church services may last for hours on Sunday, supplemented by multiple additional organized events, or long prayer sessions with speaking in tongues, during the week (Jones, 2012). The church becomes the adherent's primary mode of social life, relationship opportunities, and professional networks (Maxwell, 2000), "sealing off" the born-again Christian from the secular world.

Third, while sealed off in their relationships, new Pentecostals in Africa are nevertheless deeply implicated in worldly and secular matters, described often as aiming to "make the secular sacred" (Comaroff, 2009, p. 18). Professionals in the church organize "urban prayer projects" in markets, administrative centers, and other areas deemed in need of protection from evil spirits (Heuser, 2014). Members pray over new buildings, textbooks, cell phones, vehicles, and numerous other objects of the quotidian, modern world. While competition between churches and church leaders may explain some of this outreach into secular affairs, the practice fits uneasily with political descriptions of outbidding; instead, it might better be thought of as a common trend among very fast-growing religions, which tend toward the theocratic, encompassing, and overexuberant (Comaroff, 2009).

Finally, one cannot separate the character of modern Pentecostalism in Africa from its ties to media and public communications. Building to some degree on the lessons of American televangelists (Gifford, 1998), preachers in the new Pentecostal tradition succeed to the extent that they develop radio programs, audio files for distribution, and in some cases books that blur distinctions between scriptural teaching and self-help (see Lindhardt, 2014). Movies and television programs imbued with Pentecostal worldviews, typically depicting battles against evil spirits in fully contemporary contexts, are wildly popular in places such as Ghana, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere, and they reinforce the notion of “religion gone public” (Comaroff, 2009, p. 18). Charismatic Pentecostal adherents often make use of social media platforms to further stamp the secular world with sacred meaning, in the practice of what Comaroff (2014, p. 228) refers to as a “technically-savvy faith.” Notably, the centrality of media in the new Pentecostal movement serves multiple social purposes. It not only aids in the spreading of the sacred into the secular and helps to bolster the status of megachurches and Pentecostal personalities in a virtuous cycle of prosperity and notoriety; it also reinforces the power of church teachings. Messages of healing, divine blessings of prosperity, and spiritual victory over evil forces require strong and sustained faith in the absence of evidence. In the presence of televised miracles, however, that faith calculation becomes much easier (see Comaroff, 2009).

In view of the prominent, public place that new Pentecostalism now occupies in many African countries, and the encompassing, break-from-the-past morals of the movement in a world perceived as threatened by evil, it is no surprise that Pentecostals and their leaders vocally resent the pouring of libations at official ceremonies. It is also little wonder that the new Pentecostal movement has so thoroughly touched matters of quotidian, secular life in the region. Since politics largely concern the power of groups and leaders to organize and mobilize, the question of Pentecostalism’s role in African politics has deservedly gained some urgency. The next section builds on the characteristics of the movement to explicate the important, informal ways in which the Charismatic Pentecostal movement is shaping politics in Africa.

Pentecostalism’s Informal Influence on African Politics

Social influence does not always constitute political power; David Laitin (1986) described how, despite everyday life in the Yoruba region of Nigeria being shaped primarily by Christian and Muslim religious traditions, ancestral city-state identities instead became the central fissure along which political outcomes were determined in that area. In the case of Charismatic Pentecostalism across the continent, the social power of the movement has begun to transform politics in the region, but most notably in informal ways. Five such channels of informal political influence bear mentioning.

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

First, as described elsewhere (McCauley 2013, 2014), a noteworthy political strength of the new Pentecostal movement in Africa is its capacity to supplant the ethnic-based patron-client networks that have traditionally determined the exchange of resources for loyalty in the region. “Big Men” with access to resources from the state customarily direct those resources to ethnic kin, who in turn reward their patron with allegiance and loyalty. In this manner, clients can ensure that their welfare needs are met, while patrons enjoy the authority and legitimacy to remain in power, though at the expense of a transparent and efficient political economy.

Opportunities for Big Man rule persist wherever formal political institutions remain weak, but in the context of contemporary Africa, some of those opportunities are shifting from the traditional, rural networks of kinship to the modern, urban networks of the Pentecostal flock. Preachers and pastors, often in robust competition with other revivalist churches and with little oversight, seek the allegiance of congregants, often making great fanfare of their expanding numbers (Maxwell, 2000) and seeking especially to recruit and keep the well-heeled in society. In short, their status depends in large part on loyal financing from church members. In exchange, congregants receive resources of welfare—in part as church-based social services, as discussed below, but largely in the form of blessings and hope. In contexts of uncertainty, the promise of deliverance from evil and of health and prosperity represents for many a path worth paying for in tithes. Thus, patrons of the Pentecostal churches obtain loyalty in the form of regular attendees and their donations, while clients—the congregants—receive in return the blessing of hope for salvation in this lifetime. Materially, the balance tilts clearly in the favor of patrons, making television miracles, the encompassing social networks of churches, and the Pentecostalization of secular objects and affairs particularly important tools. The modes of distribution thus begin to favor religious leaders and networks over traditional ethnic ones, in ways that can reshape the channels of informal power in Africa.

Second, political power in Africa changes as transnational influences change, and the Pentecostal movement has created opportunities for new internationally oriented entrepreneurs to emerge. Pentecostal churches in the West seek opportunities to expand their credentials and standing, while homegrown Pentecostal churches in Africa equally covet the status and resources of relationships with Western churches or even satellite churches of their own abroad (Anderson, 2014). Gifford (1998) has argued that the heavy reliance of African Pentecostals on American revivalists and televangelists for their messages, literature, and funding has left many exposed to excessive political influence from America’s Christian Right, despite a very different set of priorities. That influence can affect the saliency of political issues in Africa. Grossman (2015) demonstrates, for example, that constraints on homosexuality have gained popular salience as the numbers of Pentecostals in African states expand, owing to ongoing American Pentecostal engagement with churches in Africa. Even as African Pentecostal churches have developed their own footing and distinctive brand of revivalist practice, new transnational networks represent distinct political influences. These patterns in transnational religious connections differ from the more structured and tempered roles of the mainline Catholic and Protestant churches (Comaroff, 2009), and they have important implications for the leaders who

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

emerge as influential, the issues they promote, and the sources of support that African Pentecostals rely on when they engage with the secular and non-born-again, particularly on moral matters.

Third, the Pentecostal movement subtly transforms African politics by shifting the provision of local services to the church. In some cases, this constitutes a shift away from state provisions; in many others it represents a channel of services that simply did not exist for some communities and congregants; and in still others it replaces the work of customary authorities or of other religious institutions. New Pentecostal ministries in Africa now provide schooling, micro-lending services, and marriage counseling (Miller & Yamamori, 2007). They often offer outreach for those with HIV/AIDS and other maladies, especially in southern African countries such as Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, and they provide numerous other social services, particularly for women and children (McCauley, 2013). Doing so helps to round out the patron-client exchange between church leaders and congregants, but it also serves the encompassing social character of the Charismatic Pentecostal movement, allowing members to live fully within the church. From an informal political standpoint, religious actors have long wielded social service provisions as a source of power in African communities (Gallego & Woodberry, 2010), and that practice continues under a new guise as Pentecostalism expands.

The dramatic expansion and the social character of Charismatic Pentecostalism in Africa have also altered access to power, the fourth of its informal political effects. Political leaders from Matthieu Kerekou in Benin to Laurent Gbagbo in Côte d'Ivoire to Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe have taken turns converting to Charismatic Pentecostal churches from their mainline or atheist backgrounds, in what Maxwell (2000) refers to as the proselytization of their political parties. Given the current status of Pentecostals as a sizable population but still generally a minority, those decisions—if political rather than faith-based—likely had as much to do with being part of a modern movement associated with prosperity and independence as with minimum winning coalition politics, but they have also had the consequence of opening political access to Pentecostal leaders and congregations.

For their part, successful Charismatic Pentecostal leaders have effectively stoked their relationships to political power via what Freston (1994) refers to as the art of “time serving”; they remain close to political figures regardless of ideology, offering services and prayers, participating in public ceremonies, and reminding congregants of the duty to vote and pray for leaders (Frahm-Arp, 2015). While Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have at times served as bulwarks against human rights violations or abuses of power in Africa (Kuperus, 2018),¹ new Pentecostal churches tend to maintain a more opportunistic posture vis-à-vis political leadership. In some cases, such as that of Pentecostal leader Arthur Kitonga in Kenya, the relationship between Pentecostal and political elites has prolonged antidemocratic policies (Sperber & Hern, 2018).

Fifth and finally, the expansion of Pentecostalism matters politically, if informally, because it contributes to a gradual reshaping of the national identity in many sub-Saharan African states. Bompani (2016, p. 6) notes that the movement’s focus on remaking the individual

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

does not stop there, as Pentecostal churches pursue three simultaneous objectives: (1) transforming the individual, (2) building the church's membership, resources, and standing, and (3) contributing to a new nation-state of Christian believers. More explicitly, several Pentecostal political leaders in Africa have called for theirs to be "Christian nations." John Atta Mills in Ghana established prayer camps to support the National Democratic Congress (NDC) party's victory and expressed his hope for all of Ghana to be a prayer camp (Heuser, 2014). Gbagbo in Côte d'Ivoire positioned himself as the hero for a divine Christian plan (McCauley, 2017). Jacob Zuma in South Africa, after having been ordained as an honorary pastor, declared his ANC party to be "God's Chosen Party" (Frahm-Arp, 2015). Frederick Chiluba in Zambia sought a revision to the constitution to declare the state a Christian nation (Sperber & Hern, 2018).

This reshaping of national identity has had great appeal to those steeped in the Pentecostal message of good versus evil. Yong (2010) explains that the same "spiritual warfare" at the center of deliverance services is also used by Pentecostal church and political leaders as a form of political engagement; it establishes clear divisions for electoral purposes, and it has the added advantage of implying prophetic powers, as a critical battle is said to loom that ordinary citizens cannot yet fully perceive (see also Meyer, 2007). The target is often Islam, either implicitly or explicitly, especially as revivalist Muslim movements have enjoyed their own recent success in the region (Heuser, 2014). Billboards for Pentecostal events often warn followers to "protect our borders" and "purge the evil within our nation," further establishing the spiritual warfare of Pentecostalism as a matter of national politics and identity.

Given the nature of Charismatic Pentecostalism in Africa as an ostensibly modern, encompassing, morally grounded worldview with strong distinctions between good and evil, it is unsurprising that those who are in the movement are all-the-way in, in ways that transform not only social interactions but also relationships with politics. As the number of Pentecostals in most sub-Saharan African states has grown substantially since the latter part of the 20th century, the movement has begun to transform the modes of resource distribution, the language of power, and the characters best positioned to exploit it.

The Impact, and Limitations, of Pentecostalism on Formal African Politics

It would be incorrect to suggest that the new Pentecostal movement is not also changing African politics in more formal, if minor, ways related to party politics, political participation, and policy formation.

Pentecostalism's Impact on Formal Politics in Africa

Sperber and Hern (2018) demonstrate that Pentecostals now report higher levels of political interest and voting, which constitutes a distinct evolution from the early days of the movement when followers were taught that politics were a dirty game (Gaiya, 2007) and

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

that “their home was not of this world” (see Kuperus, 2018, p. 46). The transformation has likely been a function of the stamp the movement has succeeded in putting on secular aspects of society, along with the time serving of leaders who encourage their followers to vote. McClendon and Riedl (2015) also note that political participation tends to rise with self-affirmatory messages, which happen to be a centerpiece of Pentecostal sermons and are made all the more so by the effective and widespread use of media to broadcast the self-help teachings of Mensah Otabil, T. B. Joshua, and other superstar preachers. Even as Pentecostalism may amplify interest in voting, however, Sperber and Hern (2018) also show that Pentecostals are less inclined to engage directly with political leaders, a finding they attribute to the deference congregants have toward their church leaders, whom they view as their political interlocutors.

The Pentecostal movement has also shown some inclination to engage in political organization and party politics, however limited. In South Africa, the African Christian Democratic Party formed as an opposition political party (see Frahm-Arp, 2015), but similar Pentecostal parties have not emerged with any consistency. More commonly, the Pentecostal movement seeks formal political recognition through umbrella Christian organizations such as the South Africa Council of Churches (Sperber & Hern, 2018). Pentecostal organizations have also entered the political fray as lobbying arms for Christian political candidates. For example, Heuser (2014) notes that the theocratic class of Pentecostals was instrumental in forming networks of political entrepreneurs to bolster the candidacy of Olusegun Obasanjo when he ran for president of Nigeria in the late 1990s.

Perhaps the most profound influence of the new Pentecostal movement on formal political outcomes in Africa comes in the form of policy development. Two issues are particularly salient, if controversial, in Pentecostal policy advocacy in Africa.

First, the Charismatic Pentecostal movement has begun to transform opportunities for women in power and politics in Africa. Just as the movement rejects the gerontocratic structures of traditional African rule, it has also broken down gender hierarchies at the church level by promoting the remaking of the individual and the importance of the modern, nuclear family. Those priorities have seeped into professional networking efforts and have given women a new and strong voice in political affairs, an especially appealing change for the upwardly mobile women of Africa who seek professional lives, respectful husbands, and political recognition (Soothill, 2007). This has the potential to reshape political leadership and the policies they pursue.

Yet, the transformation has gone only so far. Pype (2006), Cole (2004), Lindhardt (2014), and others note that even as Pentecostalism challenges the subordinate position of women, it also promotes traditional gender roles in which women are expected to be obedient, modest, virgins before marriage, and so forth. Soothill (2007) argues that Pentecostalism creates perceived change while also reinforcing traditional gender roles by treating women as complementary to men, and Mate (2002) similarly suggests that Charismatic Pentecostal churches reinforce patriarchal norms by prioritizing the domesticity of nuclear families as a form of modern social life. Thus, the absence of hierarchy

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

and the centrality of the individual in the modern Pentecostal movement come into conflict with the conservative worldview of the church, placing some limits on the extent to which Pentecostal strength will result in more women-friendly policies.

Second, the Charismatic Pentecostal movement is largely responsible for introducing the politics of sexuality into African affairs, particularly in the form of anti-homosexual legislation (see Bompani, 2016). The worldview of good versus evil in Pentecostalism has met with fairly rigid conservative social teachings in a manner that has transformed homosexuality from a taboo subject to a rallying cry for Pentecostal politicians and aspirants. Further, ties to American evangelical churches (see Gifford, 1998) and traditional African views of gender norms and sexuality have both reinforced a conservative agenda on the politics of sexuality. Pentecostal political leaders have so consistently restricted LGBTQ rights, in fact, that some describe anti-homosexuality as the new form of nationalism on the continent (see van Klinken & Chitando, 2016; Sperber & Hern, 2018). Thus, while some individuals and groups in places like Kenya courageously seek to navigate a homosexual or queer practice of Pentecostal Christianity that may portend a gradual tempering of anti-homosexuality on the continent (see van Klinken, 2019), new Pentecostal churches have generally stood strongly and vocally on the side of legislation limiting LGBTQ rights in the region.

Whether Pentecostalism flourishes in its formal institutional impact or remains relegated to social and informal roles, these restrictive policy developments are likely to be viewed with hindsight as one of the most significant influences of the Charismatic Pentecostal movement in Africa.

Limitations to Pentecostalism's Political Influence

Despite those impacts, however, to anticipate a more robust and formal role for Pentecostalism in African politics—in the form of major Pentecostal parties, for example—would be to overlook some of the key characteristics of the movement. While they may contribute to the social appeal of Charismatic Pentecostalism, they also limit its political potential.

Importantly, the movement represents for its members a call to reflect on personal growth and change. Thus, despite exceedingly rapid growth across most of sub-Saharan Africa and near unparalleled social dynamism, personal healing remains the principal draw for members (Maxwell, 1998). As such, congregants represent a natural constraint on the chiefist nature of Pentecostal leaders with political ambitions, and political acquiescence tends to be more common than political activism (see Maxwell, 1998, 2000).

Furthermore, the absence of hierarchy and structure that has allowed autonomous Pentecostal churches to flourish from small student groups on university campuses into megachurches with international followings also undermines its capacity to uniformly influence political outcomes (see Freston, 1998). The movement is fractionalized in its very structure. This has meant that Pentecostal leaders are well positioned to compete energetically for members and resources and to reap the spoils of those efforts (McCauley,

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

2013), but it has also meant that they wade into politics only as it concerns personal lifestyles, and usually in disorganized, haphazard fashion. Kuperus (2018) thus notes that the Catholic and mainline churches tend to be much more cognizant of structural injustices, and to have incentives better suited for a policy-based defense of the marginalized (see also Frahm-Arp, 2015).

What is more, politics in Africa still turn primarily on valence issues; unemployment, corruption, development, and the like motivate voters across party lines, leaving little room for Pentecostals to stake out new political territory that might bolster the emergence of Pentecostal parties, contribute to the restructuring of secular institutions, or transform political agendas toward a Pentecostal platform. Even the Pentecostal calling card of anti-homosexual legislation emerged as a valence issue, with overwhelming support for constraints on LGBTQ rights (see Grossman, 2015), leaving little opportunity for Pentecostal politicians to distinguish themselves from secular, mainline, or Muslim opponents.

Pentecostalism's impact on formal politics in Africa may also be limited by the centrality of prosperity and wealth in the African Pentecostal message, which runs counter to organized political engagement. To the Pentecostal, economic hardship is an individual condition rather than a structural one (Lindhardt, 2014), which is to be overcome through personal prayer, faith, and dedication to the church. This helps to explain the elevating of wealthy Pentecostal leaders and the celebration of their ostentatious displays of self-enrichment as signals of individual success (Maxwell, 2000). It also helps to disassociate the African Pentecostal from political obligation, beyond the calls to vote and pray for political leadership. Even redistributive policies gain little traction in a context of enthusiastic prayers for material abundance in this lifetime.

Finally, it is worth considering that, in some places, Pentecostalism may not be reshaping politics so much as politics defines, shapes, and controls the practice of Pentecostalism. In Ethiopia, for example, and in northern Nigeria and other areas with politicized Muslim-Christian relations, the Pentecostal Christian movement has faced government repression in the early part of the 21st century (see Haustein 2014; Ojo 2007). In Cameroon, a government crackdown has led to Pentecostal church closures, either to limit unscrupulous pastors or to weaken the political power of the movement (see NPR, 2014). Thus, whereas some political leaders in Christian-majority parts of Africa see incentives to embrace the Pentecostal movement, others have reason to impose limits on its reach.

Conclusion

When Pentecostal leaders and communities object to the pouring of libations at public events in places like Ghana, they are asserting the strength of a new African identity. Some refer to this as the "noisiness" of Charismatic Pentecostalism (Freston, 1996), a "muscular" brand of Christianity (Comaroff, 2009, p. 18) that breaks from the traditional past, draws sharp lines between good and evil, and promotes modern yet conservative

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

lifestyles through loud and energetic means. Yet, its noisiness is not without social and political consequence.

This article suggests that Pentecostalism succeeds in Africa by bringing traditional spirituality into a modern setting, offering social and economic hope to both the upwardly mobile and the destitute. Despite having minority status, its messages of pending prosperity and spiritual warfare, and its astute exploitation of mass media, have positioned the Charismatic Pentecostal movement to exert important if informal influence on politics in the region. Pentecostalism is reshaping the channels through which resources flow from Big Men to their followers. It is implicating new and different international actors and allowing followers to live fully within the church through the provision of social services. Perhaps most importantly, the movement has introduced language of national identity into the political setting—of good and evil, and Christian nations—that captivates just as it divides. As Lindhardt (2014) notes, informal political influence can serve as a catalyst for eventual institutional power.

Even so, some of the very features that help to explain the social success of the movement—its internal competition and absence of hierarchy; its focus on individual growth and prosperity; its reliance on prophecy and miracles whose bill will one day come due—also suggest limits to its formal and institutional political influence. Setting aside its role in the development of restrictive LGBTQ policies, the Pentecostal movement is likely too fragmented and too oriented toward individual prosperity to influence the structure of African political institutions, parties, and power in profound ways.

Recognizing these limitations, scholars tend to take a tempered, wait-and-see approach on the political power of Pentecostalism in Africa. Maxwell (2000) stresses the ambiguity of Pentecostalism's long-term contribution to politics. Meyer (2007) suggests that the movement's upsurge may well be offset by its diffusion in political influence, noting that "if religion is everywhere, it is nowhere" (p. 22). Marshall (1993) acknowledges that the incentives of Pentecostal leaders can run counter to political development, and Freston (1998) calls for more careful study of the differences in Pentecostal organizations before a clear picture of its political impact can emerge. Most nevertheless acknowledge that in Africa's mixed or predominantly Christian countries, Pentecostalism is transforming individual mentalities and, in so doing, remaking the language and informal practice of politics.

References

Anderson, A. (2004). *An introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Anderson, A. (2014). "Stretching out hands to God": Origins and development of Pentecostalism in Africa. In M. Lindhardt (Ed.), *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and impact of pneumatic Christianity in postcolonial societies* (pp. 54–74). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

- Bompani, B. (2016). For God and my country: Pentecostal-Charismatic churches and the framing of a new political discourse in Uganda. In E. Chitando & A. van Klinken (Eds.), *Public religion and the politics of homosexuality in Africa*. Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate.
- Cole, J. (2004). Fresh contact in Tamtawe, Madagascar: Sex, money, and inter-generational transformation. *American Ethnologist*, 31(4), 573-588.
- Comaroff, J. (2009). The politics of conviction: Faith on the neo-liberal frontier. *Social Analysis*, 53(1), 17-38.
- Comaroff, J. (2014). Pentecostalism, "post-secularism," and the politics of affect. In M. Lindhardt (Ed.), *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and impact of pneumatic Christianity in postcolonial societies* (pp. 221-247). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Demart, S. (2013). Riots in Matonge and . . . the indifference of public authority? *Brussels Studies*, 68, 1-9.
- Ellis, S., & ter Haar, G. (2001). *Worlds of power: Religious thought and political practice in Africa*. Johannesburg, South Africa: University of Witwatersrand Press.
- Frahm-Arp, M. (2015). The political rhetoric in sermons and select social media in three Pentecostal Charismatic evangelical churches leading up to the 2014 South African election. *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 28(1), 115-141.
- Freston, P. (1994). Popular Protestants in Brazilian politics: A novel turn in sect-state relations. *Social Compass*, 41(4), 537-570.
- Freston, P. (1996). The Protestant eruption into modern Brazilian politics. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 11(2), 147-168.
- Freston, P. (1998). Evangelicals and politics: A comparison between Africa and Latin America. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 13(1), 37-49.
- Gaiya, M. A. (2007). Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 31(3), 165.
- Gallego, F. A., & Woodberry, R. (2010). Christian missionaries and education in former African colonies: How competition mattered. *Journal of African Economies*, 19(3), 294-329.
- Gifford, P. (1991). *The new crusaders: Christianity and the new right in Southern Africa*. London, U.K.: Pluto.
- Gifford, P. (1998). *African Christianity: Its public role*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Grossman, G. (2015). Renewalist Christianity and the political saliency of LGBTs: Theory and evidence from sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Politics*, 77(2), 337-351.

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

- Haustein, J. (2014). Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia: A historical introduction to a largely unexplored movement. In H. Elliesie (Ed.), *Multidisciplinary views on the Horn of Africa* (pp. 109–127). Köln, Germany: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Heuser, A. (2014). Encoding Caesar's realm: Variants of spiritual warfare politics in Africa. In M. Lindhardt (Ed.), *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and impact of pneumatic Christianity in postcolonial societies* (pp. 271–290). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Jones, B. (2012). Pentecostalism, development NGOs, and meaning in eastern Uganda. In D. Freeman (Ed.), *Pentecostalism and development* (pp. 181–202). London, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kalu, O. (2008). *African Pentecostalism: An introduction*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Kubai, A. (2007). Post-genocide Rwanda: The changing religious landscape. *Exchange*, 36(2), 198–214.
- Kuperus, T. (2018). Democratization, religious actors, and political influence: A comparison of Christian councils in Ghana and South Africa. *Africa Today*, 64(3), 28–51.
- Laitin, D. D. (1986). *Hegemony and culture: Politics and change among the Yoruba*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lindhardt, M. (2014). Introduction: Presence and impact of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa. In M. Lindhardt (Ed.), *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and impact of pneumatic Christianity in postcolonial societies* (pp. 1–53). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Marshall, R. (1993). Power in the name of Jesus: Social transformation and Pentecostalism in western Nigeria revisited. In T. Ranger & O. Vaughan (Eds.), *Legitimacy and the state in twentieth century Africa*. London, U.K.: Macmillan.
- Marshall, R. (2009). *Political spiritualities: The Pentecostal revolution in Nigeria*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mate, R. (2002). Wombs as God's laboratories: Pentecostal discourses of femininity in Zimbabwe. *Africa*, 72(4), 549–568.
- Maxwell, D. (1998). "Delivered from the spirit of poverty?": Pentecostalism, prosperity, and modernity in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28(3), 350–373.
- Maxwell, D. (2000). "Catch the cockerel before dawn": Pentecostalism and politics in post-colonial Zimbabwe. *Journal of the International African Institute*, 70(2), 249–277.
- McCauley, J. F. (2013). Africa's new Big Man rule? Pentecostalism and patronage in Ghana. *African Affairs*, 112(446), 1–21.

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

McCauley, J. F. (2014). Pentecostalism as an informal political institution: Experimental evidence from Ghana. *Politics and Religion*, 7(4), 761–787.

McCauley, J. F. (2017). *The logic of ethnic and religious conflict in Africa*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

McClendon, G., & Riedl, R. (2015). Religion as a stimulant of political participation: Experimental evidence from Nairobi, Kenya. *Journal of Politics*, 77(4), 1045–1057.

Meyer, B. (1998). “Make a complete break with the past”: Memory and post-colonial modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostal discourse. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28(3), 316–349.

Meyer, B. (2003). *Impossible representations: Pentecostalism, vision and video technology in Ghana*. (Working Paper No. 25). Mainz University Department of Anthropology and African Studies.

Meyer, B. (2007). Pentecostalism and neo-liberal capitalism: Faith, prosperity, and vision in African Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 20(2), 5–28.

Miller, D. E., Sargent, K. H., & Flory, R. (2013). *Spirit and power: The growth and global impact of Pentecostalism*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.

Miller, D. E., & Yamamori, T. (2007). *Global Pentecostalism: The new face of Christian social engagement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

NPR. (2014, April 13). **Pray or prey? Cameroon’s Pentecostal churches face crack-down.**

Ojo, M. A. (2007). Pentecostal movements, Islam and the contest for public space in northern Nigeria. *Islam-Christian Muslim Relations*, 18(2), 175–188.

Pew Research Center. (2006). ***Spirit and power: A 10-country survey of Pentecostals***. Religion and Public Life Series.

Pype, K. (2006). Dancing for God or the Devil: Pentecostal discourse on popular dance in Kinshasa. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 36(3), 296–318.

Soothill, J. (2007). *Gender, social change, and spiritual power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana*. Boston, MA: Brill.

Sperber, E., & Hern, E. (2018). Pentecostal identity and citizen engagement in sub-Saharan Africa: New evidence from Zambia. *Politics and Religion*, 11(4), 830–862.

Van Dijk, R. A. (1999). The Pentecostal gift: Ghanaian Charismatic churches and the moral innocence of the global economy. In R. Fardon, W. van Binsbergen, & R. van Dijk (Eds.), *Modernity on a shoestring* (pp. 71–89). Leiden, The Netherlands: EIDOS.

The Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa

Van Dijk, R. A. (2002). Modernity's limits: Pentecostalism and the moral rejection of alcohol in Malawi. In D. F. Bryceson (Ed.), *Alcohol in Africa: Mixing business, pleasure and politics* (pp. 249–264). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Van Klinken, A. (2019). *Kenyan, Christian, queer: Religion, LGBT activism, and arts of resistance in Africa*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Van Klinken, A., & Chitando, E. (2016). *Public religion and the politics of homosexuality in Africa*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Yong, A. (2010). *In the days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and political theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.

Notes:

(1.) Freston (1998, p. 45) notes, however, that mainline churches in Africa have also taken their turns acquiescing to nondemocratic leaders.

John F. McCauley

Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland