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# Family Resemblances in Action

## *An Introduction to Religiopolitical Activism in Southern Africa*

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### Abstract

The introduction to this special issue argues that in many countries in southern Africa a new phase in the entanglement between the religious and the political has set in. Increasingly, activists in political fields are borrowing from religious registers of discourse and practice, while conversely, activists in the religious domain are adopting discourses and practices originating in the political domain. We suggest that this religiopolitical activism is simultaneously the product of a climate of profound social change and an important transformative force within it. In order to do justice to the complex dynamics of southern African religiopolitical activism in its manifold manifestations, we draw on the concept of ‘family resemblances’. This allows us to examine how the boundaries between religious and political registers are made the object of situated social negotiations. The family resemblances explored in this special issue range from religiopolitical activists’ habitus and their communication strategies via religious leaders’ self-positionings in relation to the political, to the creation of specific religiopolitical spaces.

## Keywords

religiopolitical activism – social change – family resemblance – southern Africa

In many regions of the world multifaceted forms of activism are presently emerging and gaining support from diverse sections of society that are striving for social, political, economic, or religious change.<sup>1</sup> This new prominence of activism and its visibility gives expression to a sense of urgency in people's pursuits of empowerment, and it also reflects their perception that their difficulties and aspirations are not being adequately addressed by existing institutions, if at all.

It would go beyond the scope of the introduction to this special issue on religiopolitical activism in southern Africa, especially in its Christian variety, to discuss in detail the historical origins, sociopolitical contexts, and wider ramifications of these developments on a global horizon. It suffices to note here that the so-called third wave of democratisation (Huntington 2012; for Africa see Young 1999; Lynch and Crawford 2011), processes of citizens' neoliberal (self-)responsibilisation (Ganti 2014; for Africa see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Ferguson 2006), the rise of identity politics of different sorts (Eriksen 2002; for Africa see Comaroff and Comaroff 2005), the global diffusion of human rights discourses (Merry 2005, 2006; for Africa see Goodale 2006a, 2006b; Wilson 1996), and the increasingly politicised awareness of socioeconomic inequalities both within and between countries, among other factors, are all contributing to the emergence of new social movements and forms of activism. In recent years activist initiatives have therefore attracted increased attention from social scientists examining the ways in which activism has become a powerful tool to launch societal and political transformations outside, cutting across, and to some extent undermining existing formal institutions.

In Africa, southern Africa in particular, people's lives are currently being reshaped by a variety of factors, several of which are named above. In addition, one can observe in Africa the increasing influence of nongovernmental organisations (Bornstein 2003; Ferguson 1990), transnational religious denominations (Adogame and Spickard 2010; Meyer 2004), and multinational corporations. Furthermore, climate change and the life-threatening depletion of natural resources, the fatal impact of pandemics like Covid-19, the repercussions of global financial crises, and the persistence of local and regional conflicts that are often characterised by radicalisation tendencies are bringing about momentous transformations in peoples' lifeworlds. It is within this climate of profound change that, similar to what is happening in other parts

of the world (Merry 2006), activist initiatives are increasingly making their presence felt in present-day Africa (Lindell 2010; Robins 2008; Thoreson 2008; Tripp 2001).

Against the backdrop of these wider developments, this special issue draws on ethnographic case studies, mainly from Botswana, South Africa, and Zambia, to focus on a type of activism that can be found throughout southern Africa, namely an activism in which religious and political registers of discourse and practice are being blurred. We suggest that this religiopolitical activism is simultaneously a product of the aforementioned climate of change and an important transformative force within it. In other words, our argument is that we are presently witnessing a new phase on the African continent in the entanglement between the religious and the political that can be examined most instructively by, first, analysing the empirical example of religiopolitical activism, and second, approaching it through the concept of 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein 1953, p.66; see also Saler 1993). We suggest that adopting the latter will show how the boundaries between these religious and political registers are made the object of situated social negotiations, with some social actors determined to have them clearly differentiated, and others assuming that they are co-extensive or interwoven.

## 1 Changing Religiopolitical Configurations in Southern Africa

In studies of twentieth-century Africa religion has repeatedly been interpreted as offering a social space and a language for political aspirations. Given the colonial experience of people on the African continent, for social scientists this has long meant concentrating on religiously framed articulations of protest and resistance against domination and exploitation (Fernandez 1978; Meyer 2004). This approach was particularly common in the study of what has long been called African Independent or African-initiated Christianity (Comaroff 1985; Shepperson and Price 1958; for a critique of this approach see Ranger 1986; Schoffeleers 1991). Focusing on people's quest for social empowerment, this research shows that many of these movements stressed (the unruliness of) Charismatic prophetism, which time and again brought them into conflict with colonial structures (Fields 1982, 1985).

However, starting in the 1980s scholars interested in African-initiated Christianity began to question the idea that anticolonial political protest constitutes the core driving force of these movements. Instead, they came to interpret them as an expression of resistance outside of the political sphere (see Ranger 1986 for an overview) or as not being concerned with resistance at

all. For instance, Terence Ranger criticised previous research for drawing 'too sharp a contrast ... between cultural and political, symbolic and instrumental' (1986, 3), which he considers to be false dichotomies. Matthew Schoffeleers, on the other hand, famously argued that the holistic healing practices of African-initiated churches make them acquiescent and conservative in outlook, since, according to him, healing normalises and 'functions so as to discourage rather than encourage active involvement in critical politics' (1991, 3; see also Van Dijk and Molenaar, this issue).

Since the 1980s the rising popularity of Pentecostal and evangelical denominations on the African continent as well as the increasing influence of their theologies on the conduct of African state politics at around the same time, as exemplified by Zambia's former president Frederik Chiluba's activities as a lay preacher (Gifford 1998; Phiri 2003), has also led to a reinterpretation of church-state relations in Africa. African Christianity is now often seen as contributing to neoliberal governmentality (for example, Gifford 2004). More recent work points to the role of Christian churches in offering a social space in which 'politics was talked about, taught and performed' (Bompani 2008, 665). In South Africa, for instance, a country with a long history of political resistance, church members' and pastors' religious discourses are infused with discourses on citizenship and human rights (*ibid.*, 666). Besides raising the general question of the role of religion in African politics, which continues to be a hotly debated topic in anthropology and related disciplines, Bompani's work can be taken as empirical evidence that in many countries in southern Africa Christian communities are currently entering a new phase of civic engagement.

The same holds true for faith-based organisations (FBOs), many of which are cooperating with government agencies in community development or the fight against HIV/AIDS (Epstein 2007). Organisations such as these have in common the fact that their appeals to the wider public formulate alternative visions of life and society, thus informing their ideas about community and the relationship between humans and the sacred realm (Elisha 2008; Kemper 2006). Also, while the implicit religious bias of humanitarianism and development work is certainly not new in Africa (Bornstein 2003; Clarke and Jennings 2008; Freeman 2012), the degree to which present-day FBO funding relies on external sources as well as the extent to which these organisations are transnationally connected definitely is (Beckmann, Gusman, and Shroff 2014; Prince, Denis, and Van Dijk 2009).

Our suggestion that there is a new phase in the entanglement between the religious and the political is based on the observation that political activists in southern Africa have increasingly started to borrow from religious registers of discourse and practice, while in turn religious activists are adopting registers

from the political domain. In doing so, we suggest, religiopolitical activists exploit the affordances provided by family resemblances between these two domains, as is discussed in detail below.

The entanglement of these processes is enforced by the growing importance of new communication and media technologies whose use is shaping the African public sphere in unprecedented ways (Larkin 2008; Meyer 2015; Schulz 2012; Zegeye and Harris 2003).<sup>2</sup> By allowing activists to reach out to diversified publics locally, regionally, nationally, and transnationally, thus enabling them to build up new solidarity networks and religiopolitical communities of interpretation, these developments have influenced activists' practices, social relations, and identities, as well as their aspirations and cultures of debate (Frahm-Arp, this issue). For institutions in the religious domain and religiously informed nongovernmental initiatives, a further consequence of this development is the intensification of the competition for public recognition and for financial assistance by international organisations and development agencies. In this tense situation many religious actors and organisations, such as those examined in this special issue, feel the need to constantly reinvent themselves, making them draw on resources that are familiar to them from the field of political activism and thus engendering a blending of religious and political registers of discourse and practice.

## 2 Steps Toward an Ethnography of Religiopolitical Activism

Of course, writing about activist religiopolitical entanglements requires clarity about what in particular is said to be involved in these entanglements. The exploration of religiopolitical activism in Africa has to acknowledge that an increasing number of scholars have recently started to reflect on the growing influence of activism in the world (De Jong et al. 2005; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; McCaughey and Ayers 2013). Also, there are now an increasing number of ethnographic explorations of activist initiatives (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Chari and Donner 2010; Counihan and Siniscalchi 2014; Gellner 2019; Hodžić 2017; Krøijer 2019; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Tsing 2005). Nonetheless, and possibly due to the actuality of this topic, there is as yet no clear-cut or broadly shared social-science definition of 'activism'. Moreover, as Kirsch (this issue) highlights on the basis of his research on faith-based organisations in Zambia, scholars are not alone in finding it difficult to unambiguously distinguish the notion of the activist from other notions, such as the volunteer. His interlocutors in Zambia perceive the boundary between these two notions to be slippery and negotiable. Bearing this conceptual blurriness in mind, the

present special issue starts out from a working definition of activism, one that understands it as a discursive and social practice that is an enacted form of societal agency and is articulated with a view to communal imaginaries, visions, and aspirations toward a better life and/or opposed to some (perceived) injustice, domination, or adverse social development.

A conventional reading of activism in the framework of social movement theory (Stammer and Eschle 2005; Tarrow 2005; Wiktorowicz 2004) suggests thinking about the dynamics of activism as collective action. In the respective literature a long-standing query concerns the emergence of social movements, and especially the mobilisation of support. Early theories in this field of study conceptualised collective action as joint activities originating in the shared interests of a certain group (Tilly 1978). However, this assumption of the unity of a given social movement set in motion by a group's shared characteristics, interests, and emotions was increasingly seen to be misleading in light of subsequent research.<sup>3</sup> For example, in her ethnography of ecoactivism against deforestation in Indonesia, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005) describes how different sets of actors joined forces in their fight to protect the natural environment. The actors involved, Tsing argues, did not necessarily have the same goals but came together at certain points in time because a joint referencing to universals (in her case nature) enabled them to converse across their otherwise existing differences. Tsing's study thus shows how activist movements evolve in specific historical and political contexts, local as well as transnational, giving rise on occasion to unusual and partly unintended alliances that can also include religious actors.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that so far the study of activism in Africa has tended to concentrate on a relatively limited range of activist concerns. While research in the fields of gender and HIV/AIDS clearly dominates the field, in recent years one increasingly finds studies dealing with LGBTIQ+ activism, youth and student activism, and African activists' use of social media.<sup>4</sup> Due to a lack of space, we cannot do justice to the breadth of the findings presented in these studies. In what follows we therefore focus on two forms of activism in which religious discourses and organisations are very clearly playing a relevant, though sometimes only indirect, role: human rights and HIV/AIDS activism.

What has lately attracted heightened attention from social scientists is activism that addresses humanitarian and human rights issues that are also promoted by transnationally active institutions (Goodale 2006b; Nelson and Dorsey 2008; Fassin 2012). As is well known, humanitarian issues have long been on the agenda of Christian organisations, which in recent decades have increasingly begun to incorporate human rights discourses as well.



Consequently one can discern a marked overlap between Christian agendas in this thematic field and what is being promoted by (transnational) nongovernmental organisations and activist initiatives.

Research on this type of activism has shown that Christian agendas in this field are often sponsored by and promoted through transnational relations of power-asymmetric cooperation and financial support, which also holds true for the field of Christian activism that is concerned with the fight against HIV/AIDS (Beckmann, Gusman, and Shroff 2014; Prince, Denis, and Van Dijk 2009). However, this does not mean that transnational agendas are simply implemented on African soil. In her study of activism against gender violence, Sally Engle Merry (2006) argues that activists translate transnationally circulating human rights discourses into local (vernacular) ideas about rights, dignity, and well-being. The outcomes of these translations tend to be hybrids, combining elements of different sources in new and unexpected ways. Research on religiopolitical activism, as pursued in this issue, thus needs to take account of the fact that the registers of activist discourse and practice found in particular locations are often not of a purely local nature but rather, at least in part, transnationally connected translations of globally diffusing activist models.

Studies such as the abovementioned by Merry point to the existence of a great variety of activist networks, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Treatment Action Campaign, whose specific modes of operation and range of activities ethnographers are just beginning to understand (Messer 1993; Robins 2004; Ticktin 2011). Furthermore, the development of new communication technologies and social media has not only given a momentous impetus to the emergence of new forms of activist initiatives, it has also influenced the aspirations and activities of existing ones.<sup>5</sup> This also holds true for wider populations in southern Africa where new media are now playing an important role in receiving and spreading information and have also contributed to the formation of new publics and counter publics (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 2012; Ekine 2010; Walton 2011). With the help of the internet, activists are able to reach larger publics—in part even ‘global publics’ (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005)—and may be successful in mobilising transnational solidarity. Most importantly for us here, in many cases social media and new communication technologies have changed the actual practices and strategies of activism (Gurak and Logie 2013; Juris and Khasnabish 2013).

Another issue that is highly relevant for the study of religiopolitical activism in southern Africa is the Christian interest in social engineering in the field of sexuality (Van Dijk 2013). While sexual education has long been a concern of Christian churches on the African continent, as has been amply reflected on by historians and anthropologists (Ojo 1997), the call to join the fight against



HIV/AIDS has fundamentally altered the engagement of these religious organisations in issues of sexuality. Christian moral agendas aimed at producing behavioural change in intimate relations have informed public debates, triggered identity conflicts, and in many cases fuelled controversies about sexual rights (Burchardt, Patterson, and Rasmussen 2016).

In recent years this process has received increasing scholarly attention (Becker and Geissler 2007; Dube 2002; Van Dijk 2013). As Bochow and Van Dijk (2012) argue, the engagement of Christian groups in the HIV/AIDS crisis often went beyond a concern with the (sexual) self to focus specifically on a re-fashioning of relationships. Christian moral notions concerning reproduction, sexuality, and marriage, as well as relating to the gendered roles of men and women in the family and the household, began to serve as markers in Christian campaigns to curb the spread of the disease (Burchardt 2015). In addition, in many southern African countries the HIV/AIDS pandemic triggered a hitherto unknown open discourse, not only about sexuality as such (Burchardt 2011), but also about the general public's perception of alternative sexualities, notably same-sex sexuality, the latter prohibited by national laws in many cases.<sup>6</sup> It is in this thematic context that scholars have started to address the role of Christian churches in disciplining expressions of sexual identity (Germond and De Gruchy 1997), most particularly the Pentecostal activist support of attempts to implement stricter laws against homosexuality (Adams 2011; see also Van Dijk and Molenaar, this issue). In some cases the latter form of religiopolitical activism was and is explicitly supported by Christian Right groups operating from the United States (Oliver 2013).

In sum, the study of religiopolitical activism in southern Africa, as pursued in the present issue, can draw on important insights from a range of work in the social sciences, most of it quite recent. Yet there is presently no comprehensive ethnographic study of religiopolitical activism in its own right, especially of the nature of the relationship between Christianity and activism in Africa.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 Approaching Activism Through Family Resemblances

In most of the existing literature on this topic activism is emphatically associated with the political domain. Even the mere mentioning of this notion without use of a qualifying adjective (*political* activism) tends to be read as referring to the sphere of politics. Given our working definition sketched above, this automatic association of activism with politics needs to be problematised. What is required is a concept of activism that is ready to acknowledge that activist discourses and practices can take different forms, some of which neither

originate from nor are confined to the political domain. In light of empirical findings presented in this issue and of previous research on this topic, it would therefore be highly questionable to base one's analysis on a sharp distinction between people's religious and activist (aka political) engagements in terms of either their institutional belonging or their intentions and action orientations.

On the most fundamental level, we understand the religious and the political, and therefore also religious activism and political activism, to refer to variable and partly intersecting registers of discourse and social practice. We contend that the existence of an overlapping and criss-crossing 'network of similarities' (Wittgenstein 1953, PI66, 67) between the religious and political registers enables activists to engage in what we call 'religiopolitical activism'. Thus instead of presupposing the existence of a clear-cut boundary between the religious and the political, and by implication between religious and political activism, we are interested in how social actors on the ground either separate these registers from each other or merge them in context-dependent ways.

Family resemblances in religiopolitical activism can take different and in part even mutually contradictory forms. In the article by Rijk van Dijk and Kim Molenaar (this issue), the Pentecostal habitus of 'insisting', that is, of firmly standing one's ground in the face of opposition to one's views and actions, shares many features with what activists are commonly viewed as doing. While this case study highlights the antagonistic dynamics of religiopolitical activism, the article by Franziska Duarte dos Santos (this issue) analyses the giving of testimonies, which resemble narrative accounts of Pentecostal believers, as a strategy of persuasion that male gender activists in South Africa use to influence other men. However, these kinds of family resemblances are not always or necessarily appreciated by local actors. This is demonstrated in the article by Thomas G. Kirsch (this issue) in respect to the anxieties of FBOs in Zambia that the volunteers they use could turn into politicised activists—an anxiety that stems from their perception that volunteering and activism are hard to distinguish. In contrast to the latter FBOs that put much effort into 'purifying' (Latour, Bruno 1993, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press) the boundary separating these two categories, Maria Frahm-Arp's comparative analysis of different Christian churches in South Africa (this issue) makes clear the gradual differences in the ways in which religious leaders position themselves in relation to the political domain: while some expressly abstain from the political, others invite their followers to actively engage in religiopolitical blurrings. Finally, the articles by Bosco Bae and Rafael Cazarin examine the role of institutionalised settings of social interaction in the production of activist religiopolitical agendas. Cazarin (this issue) argues that training workshops for the prevention of gender-based

violence, which were organised by activist NGOs from southern Africa, seek to create a safe space for participating religious leaders so as to make them experience a personal transformation that, it is hoped, will have a bearing on how they deal with cases of gender violence in their faith communities in the future. On the other hand, Bae (this issue) demonstrates that the readiness of 'traditional' healers in South Africa to pursue their own practices of alternative dispute resolution in an organisational form of interaction that is compatible with the magistrates' court system produces a constellation in which religiously informed contents are discussed within a politically framed structure, thus leading to a religiopolitical blurring aimed at enhancing the 'traditional' leaders' authority and public recognition.

The above account attests to the fact that the articles in this issue deal with different types of family resemblances that range from religiopolitical activists' habitus to their communication strategies, from religious leaders' self-positionings in relation to the political to the creation of religiopolitical spaces. That said, this special issue does not aim at developing an exhaustive typology of these family resemblances. Instead, it approaches the topic in exemplary ways and by concentrating first and foremost on the questions of what in particular constitute(s) the family resemblance(s) in a given case study and how they are produced and/or dealt with.

Finally, it should be noted that while the majority of the articles in this special issue deal with religiopolitical activism among African practitioners of Christianity and thus reflect the great importance of this religion in the countries under investigation, Bae's contribution examines 'traditional' healers and their institutions. Including his article in the present set of papers reflects our contention that no neutral standpoint exists from which to determine where Christianity ends and non-Christianity begins. Instead, as has been documented extensively in the history and anthropology of African religions, complex diffusion processes in plural religious settings have variously led to a hybridisation of religious forms, Christianity and 'traditional' religions included (Kirsch 2008). For analogous reasons, any attempt to come to an unambiguous analytical distinction between Christian and secular versions of activist morality and ordinary ethics (Bochow, Kirsch, and Van Dijk 2017) would be doomed to fail. Several of the case studies in this issue make it clear that certain prosocial registers of discourse and practices are very widely shared among people in southern Africa, regardless of whether they expressly self-identify as religious believers or not (Duarte dos Santos, this issue).

Taken together, by turning the boundaries between the religious and the political, as well as between Christianity and 'traditional' religious forms and

even between the religious and the nonreligious into objects of empirical inquiry, this special issue aims at avoiding the analytical traps associated with the application of rigid systems of scientific classification in order to do justice to the complex social dynamics of southern African religiopolitical activism in its manifold manifestations. Studying religiopolitical activism within this framework promises important insights into how Christian practitioners and organisations in Africa are presently entering a new phase of civic engagement that builds on previous forms of religious politicking, is influenced by transnationally circulating discourses, and shapes the future developments of African societies. Whereas the politics of religious interest groups have received due attention in the political science study of such developments in the Western world (Dreher and Smith 2016; Slessarev-Jamir 2011; Smith 1996), and partly also in Africa (Burchardt, Patterson, and Rasmussen 2016), we note that the fine-grained ethnographic examination of religiopolitical engagement by religious practitioners in Africa, especially in its activist variety, is still a largely uncharted terrain.

#### 4 Persuasiveness, Intensification, Interpellation

We suggest that a particularly productive way to ethnographically study the newly emerging forms of religiopolitical activism in Africa is to stress three interrelated thematic dimensions of religiopolitical family resemblances, namely the activists' languages of persuasiveness, the experiential intensity of activism, and activist acts of interpellation. We argue that these three dimensions of activist engagement are among the main reasons why religiopolitical activism has attained such a remarkable presence in the public sphere in Africa in recent decades, despite some self-professing 'non-activists' considering this presence highly problematic (Kirsch, this issue).

##### 4.1 *Languages of Persuasiveness*

Programmatic points made by religiopolitical initiatives tend to address and include registers of meaning that are affectively charged for people in the specific sociocultural settings where they are propounded, such as 'saving the creation', 'dignity', 'respect', 'humanness' (in South Africa and Botswana known as *ubuntu* and *botho*), and 'the holiness of the body or the family'. Taking the form of 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), they often encapsulate 'feelings of potency, activity and goodness' (Fernandez 1972, 48) and are generative of actions and performances. Religiopolitical activism thus makes

use of what we call languages of persuasiveness, which aim to affectively move people and thus have the capacity to 'make a movement' (Fernandez 1986, 12; see also Werbner 2011).

Our use of the word 'language' in this context is not restricted to verbal utterances but includes all symbolic-communicative acts that purposefully aim at convincing the addressees of the message being conveyed. In activist circles making use of these languages is usually learned informally during interactions and represents an important element in activist socialisation processes. Yet when studying the use of languages of persuasiveness among religiopolitical activists, one should not always expect highly systematised explanations of the world. Instead, what often predominates are fragmented arguments about the world (Jules-Rosette 1975) and broad-brush visions of the future. Aiming at the communicative persuasion of others through 'insistence' (Van Dijk and Molenaar, this issue), they often rely on eye-catching allusions and do not seek doctrinal coherence.

This focus on languages of persuasiveness contributes to insights in the changing nature of the entanglement between the religious and the political in southern Africa. Several of the articles in this issue do this by exploring ethnographically religiopolitical activism with a particular focus on the tactics, strategies, and modes of communication of activist initiatives in trying to persuade the wider public when promoting their respective visions of life and society.

#### 4.2 *The Experiential Intensity of Activism*

One of the commonest religiopolitical modes of endowing one's activist messages with persuasiveness consists in creating frames of social interaction that, for participants, are characterised by an exceptional experiential intensity. It is hoped that this will set these interactions apart not only from everyday life, but also from what is pursued by competing initiatives. The ways in which this is accomplished can take different forms, many of which draw on long-standing templates from the history of Christianity in Africa. For example, experiential intensity can result from aligning the self-presentation of the activist with well-established ideas about the charisma of prophets. In the history of AICs and evangelical Christianity, a prophet's revelatory utterances mark elevated moments of socioreligious extraordinariness that interrupt the chain of events and lead them in a new direction or generate a new interpretation of past events. Similarly, religiopolitical activists can present themselves as innovative newcomers in a particular social scene who dispose of revelatory knowledge that has the potential to change people's lives in positive ways. However, a level of such experiential intensity can also be reached by the public staging

of religiopolitical events of different sorts, some of which resemble ritual performances, or by insistently repeating and stressing certain points in highly charged moments of contestation and antagonisms. By symbolically, if only temporarily, cutting the flow of everyday life, such speech events provide an elevated social space for foregrounding the activists' concerns and can be witnessed to raise sentiments that previously had not been so prominent in people's lived realities. Moreover, they often boost self-reflexivity and give rise to a heightened awareness of the supposed necessity of opening oneself up to societal innovations.

### 4.3 *Acts of Interpellation*

Representing attempts to shape people's being-in-the-world in accordance with activists' ideas of what is required for societal change, activist languages of persuasiveness and modes of creating experiential intensity aim at the reordering of subject positions in the public sphere, a practice reminiscent of what Louis Althusser (1971) calls 'interpellation'.

It is well documented that, in many parts of Africa, Christian organisations have introduced momentous innovations that led to reformulations not only of people's beliefs but also of their subjectivities, social relations, bodily practices, and ways of living, knowing, and 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987). As Jean and John Comaroff demonstrate for the case of historic mission societies, many of these changes came into being not through the teaching of religious doctrines per se but through the missionaries' efforts to gain 'control over both the material and semantic practices through which their would-be subjects produce and reproduce the very bases of their existence' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1989, 268).

In marked contrast to these indirect and rather slow-paced infrapolitical strategies to turn people into 'real Christians' (Kirsch 2018) stands the call for a radical personal reformation by dedicating one's life to Jesus Christ through repentance and the act of conversion. On the African continent evangelical churches are known for stressing the necessity 'to make a complete break with the past' (Meyer 1998; see also Van Dijk 1998), which implies a turning away from ('traditional') conventions and often from previous social relationships (Engelke 2004; Horton 1971). In short, evangelical Christians promote discourses and practices that endorse moments of rupture and discontinuity. Reflecting on these issues while criticising fellow anthropologists for what he calls 'continuity thinking', Joel Robbins (2007) claims Christianity to be a religion of discontinuity that brings about not only radical personal change but also wide-ranging historical ruptures.

In our view, the production of ruptures also belongs to the strategies that religiopolitical activists deploy to attain an intensification of religious registers of discourse and practices in the sociopolitical field, as described above. At the same time, ruptures like these serve the interpellation of the people addressed. It is in light of this observation that several of the ethnographic case studies collected in the present issue are concerned with the refashioning of people's selves in light of specific ideas about subjectivity, personal identity, the body, responsibility, and health. What is most notable in this context is that, by targeting the individual through interpellation, religiopolitical activists often seek to change not just the respective individual but the collective as a whole (see especially Van Dijk and Molenaar, this issue). We contend that this is exactly what characterises the idea of Christian activism in contrast to what can be found in conventional Christian community life. In other words, one of the main differences between the two lies in the activist assumption that change in the collective starts with the individual, not in the form of personal acts of piety but instead by individually reaching out and trying to make a religiopolitical change in and for others.

## 5 The Articles

The articles in this special issue share an interest in the relationality between religiopolitical activists and the wider social context within which they are operating. Several of them do so with a particular focus on the ways in which these activists make their voices heard in the wider public sphere through the 'arts of insistence' (Van Dijk and Molenaar), 'giving testimony' (Duarte dos Santos), or spreading the word in the digital sphere (Frahm-Arp). The contributions also explore different modalities of religiopolitical activism that do not always or necessarily take the form of radical revolutionary action, but in certain cases aim at creating a relational 'safe space' (Cazarin) or refashioning institutional settings (Bae), and that cannot always be clearly distinguished from other registers of discourse and practice such as those associated with volunteering (Kirsch).

Of the contributions to this special issue, the article by Rijk van Dijk and Kim Molenaar addresses the history of anthropological debates on Christianity in Africa and criticises the overextended use of the notion of resistance in early scholarly work on this topic. Yet since the Pentecostal discourses and practices explored in Botswana cannot be subsumed under the category of



'acquiescence' (Schoffeleers 1991), they coin the notion of the 'arts of insistence' to describe the ways in which Pentecostal activists present themselves in the public sphere. Van Dijk and Molenaar draw attention to how certain religious identities inspire people to take on activist modes of self-assertion that can have a remarkable impact on their immediate social environment. These forms of self-assertion in which people insist on certain religious (dogmatic) principles and convictions, are inherent in the ways in which they encourage people to hold their ground even when being confronted with stern criticism or antagonism.

The next two articles focus on religiopolitical activists' ambiguous relations with government structures. Building on fieldwork with 'traditional' African healers in an urban township in South Africa, Bosco Bae draws attention to a form of institutional activism that partly connects with and partly disconnects from the state-organised legal system. Stimulated by their experience of being marginalised, 'traditional healers' aim to achieve greater representation, visibility, and authority. Even though their mediation practices differ significantly from the government's principles and practices of conflict resolution, the healers seek to forge collaboration with the government. This pursuit of greater recognition and legitimacy becomes apparent in the ways in which the healers structure their own institutional settings. Taken together, the healers' mediation praxis can therefore be seen as an activists' attempt to fill what Bae calls a 'hermeneutical and institutional gap between traditional healing and the Magistrate court system'. At the same time, the specific institutionalised ways in which the healers pursue their mediation practices constitutes a form of mimesis of both governmental and Christian structures, by which they try to comply with certain (moral) expectations of the wider institutional setting.

The article by Maria Frahm-Arp provides a historical overview of the interconnectedness between Christianity and politics in South Africa before going on to explore the public positioning of church leaders in the months leading up to the 2019 presidential election in South Africa. Even though they can all be said to belong to one and the same Christian movement, the Pentecostal-Charismatic-Evangelical complex, the religious leaders at the centre of Frahm-Arp's article, promote very different styles of political engagement among their followers. While some seek to activate their members to become politically involved, others attempt to activate them to engage spiritually, which is envisaged as subsequently having an influence on national politics. Examining the public messages that the pastors of six churches disseminated via Facebook, Frahm-Arp explores the reasons for these differences

by considering the pastors' different attitudes toward politics and political activism as well as the role of their different theological positions and the resonances of the latter among people divided along class and ethnic lines.

The remaining contributions direct the attention to faith-based and non-governmental organisations. Two of these articles explore the intersections between activism and religion with a particular focus on the use of storytelling and biographical accounts in the context of gender activism. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a South African-based, transnationally active NGO, the article by Rafael Cazarin explores the ways in which religious leaders engage with gender activism. The gender-transformative workshops organised by this NGO conceptualise religious leaders as important multipliers of the NGO's visions and notions of gender. Yet as Cazarin shows, for the religious leaders who participate in these workshops, certain contradictions emerge that are related to their own positionality in their respective faith communities, as well as to the existence of ideological discrepancies between the NGO's activist ideas and religiously informed teachings. Cazarin shows that religious leaders and the NGO representatives try to navigate these tensions by using the workshops to create a language and social space that merges religious and secular aspects. He argues that learning how to speak about their own and other's experiences of gender-based violence and gaining experience in the forging of alliances outside of their own faith community allows religious leaders to become tactically engaged in activism for gender equality.

The article by Franziska Duarte dos Santos builds on ethnographic research in urban and peri-urban settings of South Africa, and illustrates how practices of 'speaking out' fostered in the realm of gender activism resemble those promoted in the Pentecostal domain. As a means of reducing gender-based violence, the male activists at the centre of the analysis are encouraged to reach out to other men and give accounts of their personal transformations in order to mobilise those who are listening to their stories to remake themselves. More particularly, listeners are envisaged as learning from these pathways and as responding with confessional accounts of their own that mirror the narrative structure of testimonies. Yet as Duarte dos Santos also shows, by recounting their radical personal changes gender activists not only distance themselves from their past 'unreformed' selves, but indirectly also from other men, including their target group. Thus the article draws attention to the socially integrative and disintegrative effects of activism and explores the ambivalent effects of activism's communicative repertoires.

Whereas the organisations and initiatives studied by Duarte dos Santos and Cazarin seek to produce particular types of activists, the faith-based organisations introduced in the last article of this special issue fear that they

could be perceived as and infiltrated by political activists. Thus the article by Thomas G. Kirsch reverses the perspective and, using the example of faith-based organisations in present-day Zambia, investigates how institutions in the Christian fold deal with the existence of religiopolitical aspirations among the work force. He shows that the faith-based organisations he studies are at pains to not appear to be involved in political work of any sort because politics is perceived as socially disruptive. Yet given the loose formal association of volunteers with the faith-based organisations they work for, the employed staff of these organisations find it difficult to control what Kirsch calls 'partisan volunteering', that is, religiopolitical activism that is pursued surreptitiously within the purportedly neutral framework of volunteering. Kirsch discusses the strategies that members of the staff employ to prevent such activism from happening, as well as how faith-based organisations occasionally instrumentalise their volunteers to take a political stance indirectly without doing so officially.

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## Notes

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- 2 Compare Jürgen Habermas's (1991) theory of the public sphere as an influential political arena outside formal political institutions and how it has been received in social anthropology (Englund 2011; Warner 2002).
- 3 For a critique of 'groupism' in the study of ethnicity, which is also valid for activist initiatives, see Brubaker 2006.
- 4 On HIV/AIDS and gender activism see Britton 2006; Bujra 2000; Peacock et al. 2006; Robins 2006; Thoreson 2008; Van Klinken 2019. On student activism see Oxlund 2010; Zeilig 2009. On the use of social media by African activists see Bosch 2016; Ntuli and Teferra 2017. On activism in the field of disabilities see Gebrekidan 2012.
- 5 A good example of this is the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) in South Africa. While activism in the field of urban service provision such as electricity has a long history in this country, the Internet has enabled the SECC to establish itself as a transnationally well-connected organisation (Kirsch 2005), which was not possible for its precursors.
- 6 An expanding scholarship is discussing same-sex intimacy in African countries and the impact of colonial and postcolonial governmentality on same-sex practices and identities (Epprecht 2013; Isaacs and McKendrick 1992; Murray and Roscoe 1998; West and Green 1997).
- 7 At present, Islamic movements in Africa are drawing much public and academic attention in view of their political mobilisation. While this special issue is not concerned with activism by Muslims, we start with the assumption, following Kastfelt (2003), that there is a certain comparability between these forms of activism and those in the Christian domain. Our analysis of fieldwork data will thus be informed by wider debates on contemporary religiopolitico activism on the African continent, such as discussions about gender and Islam (Badran 2011).