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The Personal is Political: Pentecostal Approaches to Governance and Security

■ Brenda Bartelink | 10 February 2020

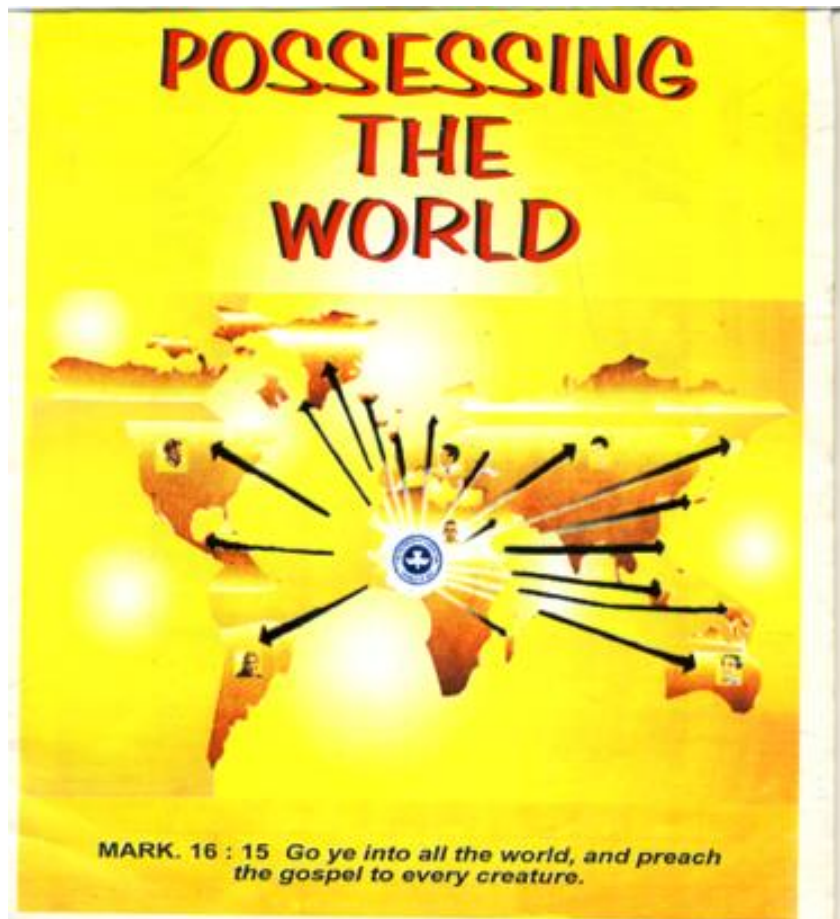


Figure 1: Source Knibbe 2019

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Pentecostalism is a rapidly growing religious movement around the world, especially in Africa and Latin America. The intersection of Pentecostal institutions, leaders, and organizations, as well as its influence in the daily lives of individuals and communities around the world, has significant consequences for foreign policy issues, including, but not limited to, gender, sexuality, political stability and security.

In this paper I explore the Pentecostal approach to governance and security, by focusing on how this approach emerges from and within a concern with the moral conduct of the individual and the family. Therefore, rather than building on the understanding of governance and security from the perspective of international politics, I will take an anthropological perspective on these matters. Building on Offutt (2019) who demonstrated the contributions of evangelical churches to governance and security, I will shift the gaze to exploring Pentecostal “worlding” (Wilson 2017). Anthropological research on Pentecostalism in particular, suggests a distinctive Pentecostal way of looking at and being in the world, that puts into question common assumptions and stereotypes about conservative religiosities.

I will focus on African Pentecostalism in particular, outlining the centrality of the family in the Pentecostal understanding and approach of governance and security. I will highlight paradoxes that become visible when considering the strong orientation towards individual and family moral conduct in relation to female empowerment and leadership in Pentecostal contexts.

This paper builds on past and ongoing research projects focused on faith-based organizations, development, and humanitarianism in Sub Saharan Africa and on African Pentecostal churches and leadership in Europe carried out since 2006. The material used in this paper has been gathered as part of an ongoing research project on religion and sexual wellbeing in the African diaspora in the Netherlands that commenced in 2016 (e.g. Knibbe 2019, Knibbe and Bartelink 2019).

Global Missions: The Case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God

According to Pew Forum (2011), almost half of the world’s Pentecostals reside on the African continent. Nigerian initiated Pentecostal churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, and Christ Embassy are global churches with a strong focus on missioning European and North American contexts (Knibbe 2012). These churches are not an exception. Across the globe we find local parishes from churches initiated in Ghana or Kenya (Krause and van Dijk 2016, Krause 2014), while in the Lusophone world churches are planted in networks that emerge from Brazil towards (Oosterbaan, Lamp & Bahia 2019). This expansion can only partially be explained by how migration and diaspora communities have given rise to transnational religious fields (Glick-Schiller 2005), as from a Pentecostal perspective the world is seen as a global mission field and church planting across the globe is an active strategy to realize a missionary calling (Knibbe 2019, 2012).

The Nigerian initiated church the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is an interesting and relevant example in this respect. It is currently one of the most influential mega churches in Nigeria, and its church compounds are beacons of organization, cleanliness, and discipline in cities and communities in which the state is fairly absent. The RCCG has built a mini city in Lagos, with a church building that covers one square kilometer. The facility includes housing, a university, schools, hospitals, garbage collection, and even power plants. It underlines the observation by Offutt (2019) that churches in the Global South are often local providers of security and governance. Further, these churches are political, as emphasized by Asonze Ukah’s (2008) description of the RCCG as a ‘new paradigm of Pentecostal power’ and by Ruth Marshall (2009) in her analysis of Nigerian Pentecostalism as ‘political spiritualities’. The political aspirations and reach of these churches extend beyond the countries in which they were initiated and beyond the global south. In fact, the global map visualizing the mission statement and missionary strategy of the RCCG locates

Nigeria in the centre of the world as the central sending force, planting churches around the world (Knibbe 2019).

The missionary perspective that becomes visible in this map puts forward a particular perspective on the world that challenges common assumptions. As Knibbe has argued, the missionary presence of this church in Europe both follows the pattern of and renders irrelevant the historical missions from Europe to the global South. It fundamentally challenges contemporary European understandings of Christianity as a remnant of the past, while reconceptualizing Europe as a dark continent that needs to be conquered for Jesus (Knibbe 2019). The self-understanding of African Pentecostals in Europe does not only throw into relief popular understandings of these churches as migrant churches in Europe, but also calls for further exploration of the moral imaginations and everyday practices of Pentecostalism.

The personal is political: families as cornerstones of healthy nations

In contemporary public and political discourses, conservative religiosities with a public mission and outreach tend to be seen as a threat to societal order and stability. However, the approach to governance within international politics does not necessarily contradict Pentecostal understandings of governance. The respect for the nation state as a form of organization of societies is visible in many churches by national flags from across the globe that decorate the worship hall. Many of the churches that I attended in the Netherlands are led by expats working in international legal institutions, universities or the corporate world. Dele Olowu, one of the special advisors to the general overseer of the RCCG worldwide and the senior leader of the Europe Mission for example, is a retired professor of governance at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague who published extensively on governance issues and served as advisor on governance to the UN. In addition to supporting governance, Pentecostal churches across the globe are often beacons of discipline and governance in contexts where states are failing to play such a role. The RCCG camp in Nigeria, discussed above, is a case-in-point.

However, it is important to be aware that Pentecostal entry points into governance issues, as well as into global human rights politics, are not necessarily the same as that of international political actors. While the map discussed above suggests a global perspective, an anthropological perspective on governance from below highlights that, for Pentecostals, security and stability on national levels emerge from stability on

individual and family levels, (e.g. Offutt 2019). Individual conversion and moral discipline are the basis for a fruitful marriage and a family blessed with children who are raised to be good Christians. Families form the basis of the church and of society. Political problems are seen as emerging from crisis in the lives of individuals and families. Dele Olowu writes: 'Socially, the fundamentals of orderly society, the family, is embedded in a deep crisis' (pp. vi). 'In this day where society plays fast and loose', says Olowu, and self-discipline, restraint, faithfulness in marriage and a well-managed family in which children respect their parents are crucial to leadership. Borrowing a famous feminist expression, one could argue that for the Pentecostal, the political is also very personal.

Zooming in on the family now, it is relevant to note that marriage and the family are understood through heteronormative frames. Men and women have particular gendered roles and relationships, even though the way this plays out in particular contexts is variable. Sexuality is seen as a crucial aspect of a stable marriage between husband and wife. A fruitful family has children, and being married and having children is seen as an important basis for developing leadership in church and society.

An understanding of the centrality of the family, enables us to understand how and why so-called family values are often promoted and fiercely defended by Pentecostals in the context of politics. Moral discipline in relation to sexual and gender norms is central to Pentecostal worlding. Yet, while some Pentecostals may choose to take strong positions on issues such as cohabitation, abortion, and same-sex marriage, in the churches where I conducted my research gender and sexual norms were rather a given than part of an active politics. Furthermore, in everyday Pentecostal praxis such morals are not always as strong or dominant as the more political or public discourses that have emerged from these contexts suggest.

Gender and lived ethics

One of the areas in which flexibility regarding gender norms is observed is with regard to pastoral ordination. However, in order to comprehend this flexibility, we need to understand the paradoxical construction of gender in Pentecostalism. The picture below, taken from a conference guide handed out at the occasion of the European Convention of the RCCG in 2017, suggests women and men are confined to traditional, patriarchal roles.

Indeed, in the dominant Pentecostal and evangelical discourse men are seen as the priests of the family. Women are primarily seen as caretakers. Together a couple is expected to model this Pentecostal lifestyle of a responsible, well-managed family. In the RCCG, male leaders are often called 'daddy' and female leaders 'mummy', emphasizing their domestic roles in the church setting the family model for the church is emphasized.

When taking up leadership roles, men are the primary leaders and women support their husbands in that role as pastors' wives. Even though women can be leaders, men generally have the senior leadership roles in the churches, both locally and globally. When women take up leadership, their roles as wives and mothers are emphasized. So far, a predominantly traditional picture.

However, there are certain paradoxes around gender in Pentecostalism observed globally, as evidenced in research in Latin America, North America, Asia and Sub Saharan Africa (Martin 2001, Soothill 2007, vd Kamp 2013). In contrast to traditional Christian churches, women have always been in leadership positions in Pentecostal churches. This has a lot to do with the importance of individual conversion (e.g. Offutt 2019). In this individual submission to God, gender is irrelevant, and emerging from this individual conversion God can call anyone into leadership. Pentecostal conversion—and by extension Pentecostalism as a whole—is in some ways post-feminist: gender difference is irrelevant. So, when you find women in leadership positions in Pentecostal churches who are allowed to preach and explain the Bible, it is relevant to know that in other Christian denominations this was (and sometimes still is) rarely seen.

The emphasis on men as senior leaders, as illustrated in the picture, paradoxical as it is, is in many ways comparable to the glass ceiling observed in secular industries. Women in leadership have to accept that their leadership is defined in relation to their spouses, or other male leaders in the church. The question is of course why women, and women leaders in particular, accept this. Why are women attracted to Pentecostalism even though it is not as equal as it theologically claims to be?

Research in Sub-Saharan Africa suggests, that the Pentecostal emphasis on breaking with cultural and traditional ties through conversion has empowered women (Meyer 1998, Bochow and van Dijk 2012). Women who embrace Pentecostal theology, have successfully been able to reduce the influence of the extended family in which they often did not experience the agency to make their own decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health. Women within Pentecostal contexts have the power to choose their own husband, rather than submitting to marry someone the family suggests. Playing their role in the nuclear family

means that women are more empowered than their mothers and grandmothers were.

Perhaps more important than offering women an avenue to be empowered, Pentecostalism has transformed traditional masculinities (Chitando and Van Klinken 2015, Bochow and Van Dijk 2012). Pentecostal men are expected to be responsible husbands who are disciplined and take care of their families. This form of masculinity is actively promoted in the churches, and is a basis for taking up leadership roles. Women actively search for men who commit to Pentecostal Christianity. In addition, they rely on the support of church leaders when they experience difficulties in their marriages. Most churches offer counselling programmes for individuals and couples. In exchange for more influence in decision making before and within marriage, women accept that they have to model the ideal family in which their husbands are the leaders. Feminist anthropologists also refer to this paradox as a gender trade-off (Martin 2001, Soothill 2007).

While research on female leadership in Pentecostal settings is still limited—and academic research has its own gender biases—there are studies that suggest that in practice female leaders often have their own space for leadership (Soothill 2007, Mayer 2016). In fact, female leaders may even become quite influential because they are more trusted and acknowledged with intimate and emotional matters by the people in their congregations (Cassleberry 2018). Some studies suggest, that women from Pentecostal churches feel spiritually empowered and negotiate better positions, not only in their families and churches but also in their secular careers.



Figure 2: Primary Material, RCCG, EUROCON 2017

In my own research I noticed that female leaders in African Pentecostal churches in Europe play a leading role in addressing matters of sexual health and wellbeing (Bartelink & Knibbe 2019). From these practices a different picture emerges than the morally rigid discourse we find in the formal statements of these churches, as female leaders carve out their space to address sexual and reproductive health challenges as women experience them in their daily lives.

Looking beyond polarized and often strong political positions to what is going on in the everyday, may also open up our perspectives on how governance, security, and justice is realized from within these contexts. In the spirit of Nairobi 2019, in which women were described as the 'game changers', recognizing, encouraging, and supporting female religious leadership in conservative religious communities provides a fruitful starting point for this endeavor.

Concluding Reflections

This paper has considered the intersections between Pentecostalism and governance, through exploring what governance and security mean in the Pentecostal way of seeing the world and being in the world. It has argued that individual and family moral conduct is seen as a crucial building block of governance at the congregational, national, and global levels. The religious and the secular is not as separated in the Pentecostal worldview, as it is in secular politics. It is therefore important for diplomats and other foreign affairs practitioners to understand Pentecostalism as it is lived and meaningful for millions of people across the globe. This understanding allows for an appreciation of how and why Pentecostals, alongside other religio-political actors, may contribute to politicizing decisions around the most personal and intimate aspects of life such as marriage, sexuality, and child birth. Exploring the paradoxes around female empowerment and leadership in Pentecostal settings, I have argued that even when the most dominant image or discourse is rigid and normative, one has to understand how this plays out in practice, which may be more flexible and dynamic than is suggested. The Pentecostal success in transforming traditional masculine roles, however, may be relevant beyond Pentecostal worlding. Contemporary human rights actors that find themselves deeply concerned with transforming masculinity in such a way that it can break away violence and patriarchal domination, might find a partner in Pentecostal actors standing up against gender based and intimate partner violence.

More broadly, there is a need for more dialogue between secular and religious actors around gender and sexuality. The impact and implications of conservative religiosities for the human rights agenda are very clear. In the ICPD summit in Nairobi in 2019, it was observed again that sexual and reproductive health and rights and sexuality education continue to be challenging matters. However, it is important to better understand the religions and spiritual world views of the religious communities that support such politics.

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