The Politics of Conviction
Faith on the Neo-liberal Frontier

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Abstract: What, if anything, is distinctive about the Pentecostal revival that is currently palpable in many parts of the world? How might such revitalization be related to larger transformations in economy and society, and to enduring Weberian questions about the spirit of capitalism? Drawing largely on material from the US and Africa, this article explores three dimensions of contemporary theologico-politics—the sociological, the ontological, and the cultural—to examine the ways in which current religious emphasis on realism and rapture in many quarters might differ from apocalypse past, and how theocratic tendencies might be linked to shifts in the nature of the state, the shape of the secular, and the axioms of liberal humanism. How have the mass media played into this, and why are they such uncannily apt vehicles for a late-modern culture of the miraculous?

Keywords: capitalism, liberal humanism, neo-liberalism, Pentecostalism, revelation, secularism, theologico-politics, Weber

The sacred, it seems, is becoming ever more prominent in profane places. Like the message beside a highway to Sun City, northwest of Johannesburg, reading “Jesus is the answer” in large, uneven letters, or the image of the Virgin Mary that revealed itself to construction workers in Chicago on a damp afternoon in April 2005. The workers had been repairing a concrete underpass on the Kennedy Expressway, one of the city’s busiest thoroughfares. Fanned by avid television reportage from across the country, the news spread, and soon hundreds of people had gathered, wreathing the image with flowers and votive candles. Yet the gentle spirit evoked surprisingly strong emotions: watchful police were unable to prevent nocturnal vandals from scrawling the words “Big Lie” across her sepia visage. When the city fathers ordered the whole expanse to be covered in plain brown paint, her features shone through again, as if to confirm the irrepressible presence of the divine, even in the most inhospitable
of locales. Such apparitions are hardly unprecedented, especially in popular Catholic culture. However, until recently, events of this sort have been less visibly a feature of mainstream public life in the US and in other contexts that are predominantly Protestant. But times are a-changing. In 2004, a toasted sandwich bearing the face of the Virgin fetched $28,000 on e-Bay. Soon after, a pro-life passion play that centered on hapless coma patient Terri Schiavo took control of the American mass media, refashioning Schiavo as a middle-aged fetus threatened by liberal abortionists and others willing to flout the letter of divine law (see J. L. Comaroff, this issue). The fervor spurred an effort in the US Congress to overrule the sovereignty of the courts, which, after due deliberation, had decided that Schiavo’s existence on life-support machines should be brought to an end.

Like the ‘manifestation on the motorway’, these events underline the extent to which—amid ever more audible worldwide commitment to market rationalization—a new religious realism, whether in Pentecostal or Latin shape, is pervading mundane American life. Efforts to propel ‘creationism’ onto school syllabi in the South in the guise of ‘intelligent design’ have been accompanied by ‘born-again’ pastors issuing fatwahs against foreign heads of state. As the ‘Religious Right’ became a tangible influence on politics in the early twenty-first century, government itself resorted more overtly to the language of divine imperative. Theologico-politics, a concern of crusading seventeenth-century rationalists including Spinoza ([1670] 1883), is once again a lively reality. Returned, too, is early nineteenth-century “Christian Political Economy” (Norman 1976: 41), making cheerful fellowship with the spirit of neo-liberal capitalism: mass-merchandised hamburgers now come wrapped in biblical homilies, and Starbucks coffee cups have been graced with quotations from best-selling pastors like Rick Warren (Cave 2005). The Christian exercise chain, Lord’s Gym, promises to build body and soul—without compromising a properly “Christian atmosphere” (Schippert 2003). Its logo is a pumped-up Jesus, bench-pressing a huge cross under the message “His Pain Your Gain.” Muscular Christianity is upon us, in unabashedly literal form. The erotic is also close to the surface. The aim is to turn you on—to the Passion of the Savior. Music that is simultaneously devout and brimming with worldly desire floods the pop charts. And Hollywood becomes Hollywood as the likes of Mel Gibson re-present the Savior’s suffering with the graphic hyper-realism of the action movie (Scott 2005).

Despite its vibrancy, much of this is not all that new. Faith has never been separate from commerce: “Jesus taught in the temple and the marketplace,” notes Starbucks’s Pastor Rick; nineteenth-century Italian wine merchants sought papal endorsements (Cave 2005); and Victorian Methodist missionaries deployed commodities and mass-marketing techniques to promote God’s Word at home and abroad (J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff 1997: 168f.). Nor are we witnessing a simple growth in religious observance: recent US surveys report that despite all this evangelical activity, the numbers of those who profess no faith are also on the rise. We may well be caught up in the consequences of an epochal religious revival—Robert Fogel (2000) has controversially termed...
it the “Fourth Great Awakening”—but revitalizations of one kind or another have occurred repeatedly over the centuries. Nor is it even a matter of religion having ‘gone public’ in unprecedented ways, reconfiguring received definitions of the sacred and the secular with the rise of ever more state-like, faith-based institutions. Despite its protestations to the contrary, modernity never was truly disenchanted. This is less a matter of its revered institutions having taken on the status of sacred forms, as writers like Schmitt (1985) have argued. For while they may have been hallowed, these institutions were also assertively secular. It is more that, despite all this, as Asad (2003: 5) insists, religion proper has not actually been absent from the public life of most modern nation-states, although its precise place within them may have varied. Thus, while the British state has been linked to the established church, its population has been relatively irreligious—the reverse of the situation in the US.

The issue is that, amid a flourishing of confessions of all types, the hegemony of liberal humanism—what Asad (2003: 13) terms “the modern project”—has been assertively brought into question in recent times, largely in the name of revealed truths and divine imperatives. In some places, these confrontations have been explicitly framed as challenges to prevailing notions of the secular; thus, the prolific pre-millennialist pastor Tim LaHaye (1980) attacks the ‘hubris’ of liberal humanism, in so many words. But dissent often emerges as a less overt shift in sensibility, a loss of faith in key tenets of modernist ontology—like the taken-for-granted reality of the ‘social’ or the axiom that truth, morality, and progress flow from human action under evolving historical conditions (cf. Harding 1994). There is, in fact, an ever more audible appeal, both popular and scholarly, to absolutist truths. Nor is this limited to Pentecostals, those ‘born again’ through direct experience of God by means of baptism in the Holy Spirit. Benedict XVI, described by one critic as “a 14th century pope with a 21st century communications network” (Monbiot 2005: 31; cf. Flores d’Arcais 2006), put it like this: “We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism, which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires” (Monbiot 2005: 31). From this perspective, claims that norms may vary across time and space are a dangerous delusion, a slippery slope to meaninglessness, solipsism, and a Hobbesian state of nature. A deep suspicion of hermeneutics, of contextual understanding, and of the recognition of difference is shared by foundationalists across a range of creeds. They link in form, if not in content, to the concerns of other opponents of liberal humanism, from political neo-conservatives to market fundamentalists. The latter are also partial to declaring the end of history and the treachery of philosophy, preferring a putatively literal reading of the law from pulpit and bench (Crapanzano 2000).

A related aspect of revitalized faith—no less in tension with the modernist project—is the growing salience of revelation as a legitimate basis for knowledge, action, and the definition of worldly space and time. Zionist settlers embrace their messianic mission with a zeal rivaled only by the youthful Muslim martyrs who seek to actualize their own sacred calling on the same terrain. Likewise, there is a host of other born-again believers across the world who suspend ‘free’ choice when acting on their convictions, manifesting a form of
selfhood that is different from the idealized, deliberative Kantian subject considered by many as being at the core of modern rationalism (cf. Hansen 2007). Foundational texts and prophetic callings speak to a quest for absolute sovereignty, an unquestioned basis for law and order, and a fixed correspondence between signs and referents, all of which are seriously undermined by current social conditions.

But these revivified faiths do more than merely question from below the tenets of liberal modernist knowing and being. They aim, also, to counter the institutional arrangements that have embodied this ontology in its various, historically rooted forms: the arrangements canonized in the Euro-modern nation-state, with its putatively neutral public civil domain, clearly separated from the realm of private commitment and belief. Revitalized Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and nativist movements have all striven, if in distinctive ways, to reconstitute the order of things, to challenge the authority and neutrality of state law and the secularism of the market (J. L. Comaroff, this issue). Many late-modern faiths work to unify the fragmented realms and plural cultural registers of liberal modern societies, seeking to recover the profane reaches of everyday existence as instruments of divine purpose. Commerce, government, education, the media, and popular arts—nothing seems too trivial or debased to offer grist to the spiritual mill. The task, according to Ted Haggard, the former president of the National Association of Evangelicals, is to put “God-in-everything,” so “anything-can-be-holy” (Newton 2006).

This impetus has special salience in an age of widespread deregulation. At a time when, under the sway of neo-liberal policies, many states have relinquished significant responsibility for schooling, health, and welfare—in short, for the social reproduction of their citizens—religious organizations have willingly reclaimed this role. It is a role that, in some places, they never fully lost to the grand disciplinary institutions of the welfare state. The recent expansion of faith-based social services has challenged the separation of powers that underlay the ideals, if not always the practices, of most twentieth-century liberal democracies. These days, the life of the spirit extends ever more tangibly to profane realms beyond the space of the sanctuary and the time of worship, heralding a significant reorganization of the modernist social order as a whole.

In fact, organized religion has made a vital place for itself in the world of politics, the market, and the mass media. Even more, it tends to take on their work, evincing a shift from the division of institutional labor that is described in signal modernist accounts, like those of Durkheim ([1893] 1947) and Weber (1930). This fact is made graphically evident by the large, luxurious mega-churches that flourish on the new frontiers of the post-industrial economy in the American West, where they are held to constitute new town squares and “surrogate governments” (Mahler 2005). Here Pentecostals deliberately blur received distinctions to encompass diverse reaches of secular life—business, schooling, day care, athletic facilities, counseling, gourmet dining. The pastor of one such center is quite up front about hitching God’s business to the ordinary wants of the world: “If Oprah and Dr. Phil are doing it, why shouldn’t we?… We want the church to look like a mall. We want you to come in and say, ‘Dude, where’s
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the cinema?" (ibid.: 33). Said a South African counterpart: “It might sound heretical, but we strive above all to make our services exciting, affecting. Our competition, after all, is the video arcade, the movie house, and the casino.”

Pentecostal holism is even more vibrant in the global south, where it resonates with forms of spiritual pragmatism that were never really captured by Protestant orthodoxy. What Paul Jenkins (2002: 3) terms the “New Christian Revolution” is centered in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, which together have a growing majority of the estimated 2.6 billion Christians worldwide. Evangelical Pentecostal churches are said to attract almost 20 million new members a year, having emerged as the major competitor of Catholicism, which is itself becoming markedly more charismatic (Nixon 2003). Here, too, it is not merely that faith-based initiatives are expanding, that their culture of revelation is having a major impact on ordinary understandings of self, identity, politics, and history. These movements are assuming a widening array of civic responsibilities, especially where state sovereignty has been compromised for one reason or another.

The mass media have played a vital role in extending the reach of faith in the world, not just because they radically amplify the scale, speed, and directness of its address, but because they have become integral to the way that revelation stages itself. To a large extent, the media have come to shape the very form in which the sacred is witnessed, especially in the growing number of so-called electronic churches across the planet (see Smith 2004). Recall here the quip about Pope Benedict’s communications network (cf. Rajagopal 2001 on Hindu revitalization). Of course, the media have been used to spread the Word since the advent of the printing press, and evangelists in Africa and elsewhere have long been avid users of novel means of communication, from magic lanterns to movies. At the same time, the reach of popular religious broadcasting today seems unprecedented. In Africa, transnational Evangelical and Muslim groups (Hackett forthcoming; Meyer 2002, 2004; Schulz 2007) are taking advantage of the deregulation of state media to build broadcast enterprises that have a powerful impact on the circulation of images and the creation of subjects and publics. The means of communication in general are ever more under the control of faith-based corporations on the continent, and religious actors conduct a growing proportion of media-related business, from paid religious programming to Pentecostal videocassettes, gospel CDs, and tapes conveying the baraka of sheikhs (Soares 2004).

Religious vernaculars are also colonizing popular culture. In the huge West African video industry, best exemplified by Nigeria’s ‘Nollywood’, movies range from crime dramas to witchcraft horror, but most tend to project a ‘Pentecostalite’ worldview in which the surreal meets the supernatural (Meyer 2004). In Latin America, the airing of glossy, camera-ready spectacles on high-tech neo-Pentecostal channels is said to be infusing the production values of televangelical drama with an understanding of local rites, for example, exorcisms (see Smith 2004). Similarly, in Africa local ritual practice is being significantly affected by these electronic genres: in South Africa’s rural northwest, healers offer Internet and television divinations, while Pentecostal leaders urge...
followers to ‘download’ Jesus into their lives. In 2005, a Brazilian preacher told an audience of hundreds in the gleaming new Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in central Cape Town: “When the film credits roll at the end of your life, they will not acknowledge the South African government. They will thank us at the Universal Church.”

This creativity and exuberance defy easy explanation. The qualities displayed by revitalized faiths are both old and new, uniform and diverse, global and thoroughly domesticated. Movements of this kind, whether Christian or Muslim, hardly exhaust the contemporary religious terrain. But older, established denominations that tend to question their values and motives have also had to respond to the stunning effectiveness of their modus operandi and their seemingly irrepressible appeal, especially among the young. While there appears to be an elective affinity between Pentecostalism and the unruly vitality of economic liberalization, its style of pragmatic preaching has roots reaching back to the ‘positive thinking’ fostered by Christian Science in the late nineteenth century and to the ‘name it and claim it’ Word-Faith (now called the ‘Rhema’ doctrine), first popularized by Kenneth Hagen of the Assemblies of God in Texas in the 1930s (Albrecht 1999). What is more, while often associated with ‘free-market faith’, not all Pentecostals worship at the shrine of prosperity. Dubbed “the conscience of evangelical Christianity,” the Trinity Foundation of East Dallas “wages a fervent war against televangelism and what it terms the ‘Gospel of Greed’” (Bilger 2004: 70). Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the spectrum, too literal a faith in the power of belief to produce riches sometimes puts Pentecostals at odds with the actual workings of market enterprise. This was the case with respect to ‘Miracle 2000’, a South African pyramid scheme whose born-again founder promised a 220 percent return on investments in 42 days. The promise drew crowds from across the land to the founder’s East Rand home. When the police cracked down on the scheme, hundreds of outraged believers marched on the High Court in Pretoria to demand the release of their “Messiah,” carrying placards that read “Do My Prophet No Harm” (Bokaba 2000).

How can we explain the exuberant growth of ‘new Christianity’ in these times? What are its continuities with—and breaks from—the past? Talal Asad (2003) has argued that the process of defining the space of the secular has been essential to the modern state and its mode of governance. But how might we account for the widespread popular impetus, in the early twenty-first-century world, to redefine the place of religion in the civic order? How exactly have nation-states been implicated, and might we not need to go beyond their logic of operation to get at what underlies these transformations? There is much to suggest that the character of contemporary faith is integral to a new stage in the life of capital—a shift that is less a complete rupture with the past than a reorganization of core components of capitalism as social formation. This has implied an intensification of some signature features of industrial modernity and an eclipse of others, a process made manifest in the changing credo and institutional form of liberal democracies across the world. Such shifts vary in local manifestation, as do the nature and impact of the kinds of religious revitalization I have
been describing. Some scholars have argued, for example, that the challenge to secular hegemony has been less evident in Western Europe—the presumed heartland of liberal democracy—than elsewhere, although there is mounting evidence to suggest that this claim might need rethinking.\(^9\) Indeed, there are grounds for identifying some very widespread trends in religious life across the world. How might this reconfigured social landscape speak back, with latter-day insight, to classic accounts of religion and modernity, such as Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930)?

### The Same Again, but Not Quite: The Neo World Order

What has come to be glossed as ‘neo-liberalism’ has been characterized in a variety of ways, few of which capture adequately the refractory mix of continuity and breach, intensification and transformation, at work. For my purposes here, I stress the fact that the current moment entails an epochal shift in the relation of capital, labor, consumption, and place. The generation of wealth is more reliant than ever on abstract media: on the transaction of quasi-monetary instruments across space and time in the electronic economy, and on means such as the market in futures and the extraction of profit from intellectual property (cf. Ghosh 2006). Primary production has also been reorganized as the quest for cheap, tractable labor has eroded existing bases of industrial manufacture, globalizing the division of labor and significantly liberating corporate enterprise from state regulation—at least until the onset of the fiscal crisis of 2008. As sites of manufacture and consumption have been dispersed across the earth, their connection has become increasingly opaque, undermining the very idea of a national economy in which local interest groups recognize each other as interdependent components of a commonweal (J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff 2000).

As a result, the spatial articulation of politics and economy has been fundamentally disrupted, and globe-trotting capital has renegotiated the terms of its relation to the nation-state. Governments have had to make new kinds of accommodation with market forces, striking novel power-sharing partnerships with private enterprise and allowing corporations to roam abroad while operating with reduced regulation at home. States themselves have outsourced key functions, from customs and excise to prisons and warfare, sometimes (as the Dubai Ports dispute in the US made plain)\(^10\) to foreign operators. These shifts render borders ambiguously open and closed. The private contracting of public services is not unique to neo-liberal times, but state monopolies over the legitimate means of enforcement have been a founding precept of liberal democracy. Now sovereignty is often blurred or overlapping, and ever more intense, disarticulated flows of bodies, goods, finances, and media link ‘communities’ in highly convoluted circuits of exchange that governments are increasingly less able or willing to regulate. All this undermines not only the experience of a unitary political community that is bound by the space-time of the nation, but also the modern idea of ‘society’, which presumes a similar
territorial architecture and integrity of organization. The proliferating horizons mapped by deregulated exchange multiply the bases of local identification, calling upon people to reconsider the once axiomatic attachments that configured their lives, the bounded ‘we’ of which they are part (cf. Coetzee 2005: 193). Representation, both semiotic and socio-political, is destabilized by these shifts, a sensation heightened in many places by the radical devaluation of key media of value—national currencies, for example—and a widespread perception that in the post–Bretton Woods era, the real value of money is progressively more inconstant, fore grounding the slipperiness of the relation between signs and meanings, the real and the counterfeit, the thing and the fetish. Some—like William Connolly (1996)—have argued that the radical deconstruction of received identities clears the way for liberating possibilities. But there is much to suggest that it often triggers the reverse: a quest for fundamental certainties, authoritarian truths, absolute sovereignties.

Revitalized movements are able to find a firm foothold on such disrupted terrain. Yet these movements are not autonomic responses to neo-liberal transformation. Born-again faiths, especially in the South, often run ahead of such transformation, bearing aspirations—visions of a this-worldly millennium—that help prepare the ground for more radical, market-oriented reform, yet another Weberian issue to which we will return. In what follows, then, I shall examine some of the ways in which these new forms of religious life might be related to ongoing shifts in the relation of economy and society, religion and secularism. Three dimensions of this relationship are especially striking. The first is sociological: the fastest-growing religious movements tend to take the form of theocracies, to embrace an ever wider array of once secular activities and regulatory functions as part of a quest for the total reclamation of the social sphere. The second is ontological: many born-again faiths strive to counter relativism and a crisis of meaning by offering cogent orders of fixed referents and absolute truths. The third is pragmatic: many contemporary faiths, in both the North and the South, tend to mimic the creative forms of the market, promising to unlock unprecedented sources of value and productivity by tapping the direct operation of God in the world. While these three tendencies are not presently limited to Christian revitalization, my focus here will be primarily on Pentecostalisms of one sort or another, for the most part in Africa and the United States.

Making Us Whole Again

Across the ages, religious utopianism has repeatedly sought to return to holiness through wholeness (Cohn 1957; Douglas 1966), through integrative visions and encapsulated communities that pursue a primal, prelapsarian unity, a oneness with divinity that is free from all manner of mediation. In the late-modern era, contemporary megamovements seek to build a new Christendom by healing breaches and distortions of the original Word that seem to have been exacerbated by current historical conditions. At the same time, the forces of economic
and political liberalism have disturbed the institutional arrangements that characterized the high-modern world of industrial capitalism, colonialism, and the European nation-state. As a result, relations among locality, class, and identity have been complicated. Difference appears to have overwhelmed sameness, and ideology has ceded ground to “ID-ology” (J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff 2003; see also J. L. Comaroff, this issue). In all this, modernist nationhood can no longer presume to monopolize the affect and imagination of its would-be subjects. For example, a recent study found that while South Africans do not reject their national identity, the “vast majority” think of themselves first and foremost as members of “an ethnic, cultural, language, religious or some other group,” and “attach their personal fate” to those entities (Gibson 2004: 2). Similar investigations carried out elsewhere (Rex 1996) confirm that while most human beings continue to live as citizens in nation-states, they tend to be only conditionally citizens of nation-states. Their composite personae may include elements that disregard political borders and/or mandate claims against the commonweal within them.

The rise of evangelical organizations that approximate many features of ethno-national movements and proto-governments is all of a piece with these general historical developments. So too, alas, are the passionate conflicts that often accompany the spread of identity-based loyalties, especially where aggressively proselytizing faiths burgeon in situations of political instability. Walter Ihejirika (2005) points out that Nigerian Pentecostalism has declared its aim to be a “Total Take Over” of the country, to be accomplished by establishing inroads from the fringes to the core of the national polity. “[We] are working while others are sleeping,” a leader of the national Pentecostal Fellowship announces. “If you want to take over Nigeria, you better win the students, win the market women, the media … the rich, the poor and the press.” Here religion is about world-making. It is inherently political. In West Africa, as in the United States, these expansionist movements tend to be centered on particular charismatic leaders, whose congregations and megachurches, while often part of religious federations, remain organizationally independent (ibid.). As is often remarked, the fact that Pentecostals stress personal religious experience rather than doctrine allows for considerable differences among them, although they remain united in their foundational belief in baptism of the Spirit and in the operation of charismatic powers in the world. What is more, widely shared goals (e.g., extending God’s dominion on earth by promoting Christian values, and returning religion to the schools, courts, and market square) have made them a force that transcends local organizations in many places.

In North America, it is now a truism that the Religious Right plays a key role in electoral politics, both local and national, with implications for the shaping of government policy. In Kiev, the home to Europe’s largest single evangelical church, an army of self-designated “Christian capitalists” is credited with helping sweep pro-Western candidates to power (Sharlet 2005: 47). In fact, in a recent 10-nation survey of Pentecostal and charismatic Christians, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that adherents of such “renewalist” faiths made up a fast-growing segment of the population in countries including
Brazil, Guatemala, Kenya, South Africa, and Chile. The survey also reported that adherents were prone to bringing their personal commitments into public debate, with real political consequences.\textsuperscript{12}

All of this reinforces the point that new holistic movements are part of the neo-liberal turn, both reactively and intrinsically. In their readiness to take charge of forms of community service such as welfare and rehabilitation that late-liberal governments cannot, or will not, provide, revitalized movements have often extended modes of civic care beyond the bounds of the church proper. To be sure, this is hardly a novel feature of religious movements, but once again the process takes on specific late-modern features: faith-based initiatives have been subcontracted by state governments (either formally or by default) to undertake civil services ranging from prison management and care of the elderly to the delivery of mail. At times, this trend is seen explicitly as a valued infusion of the public sphere with an ethos of sacrifice and service that has been systematically eviscerated by the “bloodless” secular state (Muehlebach 2007). The expansion of Pentecostal membership among the indigent, from Siberia to South Korea, Alaska to Albania, makes evident a certain organizational genius that thrives on the very socio-economic conditions that have undercut more conventional forms of modern social aggregation rooted in class or locality. Widespread use is made of the so-called cell-group structure, in which networks of highly ritualized small units proliferate yet remain alike in their mode of professing faith. This method of organization was popularized by Paul (David) Yonggi Cho, who built his massive Seoul church to wage what he claimed was a ‘frontline’ battle against communism (cf. Stockstill 1998). Multiplex, face-to-face congregations—offering everything from soup kitchens to computer literacy classes, personal counseling to video-animated worship extravaganzas—also fill the classic role of churches as places of intimacy, affective engagement, and recreation. Pentecostal networks that span continents provide portable conviviality to migrants bereft of other cultural capital, much like the grassroots churches that nurtured an earlier generation of mobile workers in colonial Africa (Gaiya 2002; Welbourn and Ogot 1966). As this example implies, the upsurge in revivalist faith is also implicated, in complex ways, in global economic restructuring: in the ironic combination of intensified cultures of consumer desire with widening Gini coefficients, and in the chronic exclusion in many places of a growing proportion of the population from the formal economy—a process that generates an ever more acute combination of appetite and impossibility. Connolly (n.d.: 30) has argued that in the US, right-wing evangelists play most directly on the resentment felt by working- and middle-class men, who find themselves squeezed between the male business elite and professional women entering the lower reaches of the economy.

Those born-again faiths that propagate the spirit of neo-liberalism, that see the creativity of God as immanent in the creativity of capitalism (Connolly n.d.: 33), contrast markedly with older-style mainstream Protestantism, which remains ambivalent about the frank embrace of worldly appetites. Pentecostals, by contrast, show great readiness not merely to collaborate with business but to enter into businesses themselves in a higher cause—a form of “Free Market Theology”
(Sharlet 2005: 41). Hence, there is an avid endorsement, most evident in the ‘prosperity gospels’, of the desire for material things. “The Lord delights in my private aircraft,” a successful motivational-speaker-turned-preacher recently assured a skeptical Larry King.\(^{13}\) In a similar spirit, the Brazilian pastor of the Universal Church in central Cape Town periodically yanks open the door of the large wooden cupboard that stands on the podium, proclaiming: “The Lord will open his treasure chest to those who believe.” The stress on personalized divine intervention, on a faith that “takes the waiting out of wanting” (a phrase that this Pentecostal preacher shares, ironically, with a 1970s British ad campaign for a major credit card), accords well with the spirit of neo-liberal enterprise, encouraging an identification of spiritual gift with the ‘hidden hand’ of market providence. I shall return to these issues in a moment.

As I have already intimated, while not all Pentecostals champion prosperity, most are comfortable with freedom of enterprise, enabled by an ideology of downscaled government and a politics of “intense moral purity” (Watney 1990: 100). Bringing state law and public institutions into conformity with conservative Christian values (with a focus on issues such as abortion, stem-cell research, gay marriage, the teaching of evolution in schools) is more consequential than a concern with secular forces for social betterment. At issue here is a different ontology of how the world works: mass conversions confirm that charismatic faith and styles of worship jibe with radically revised perceptions of the nature of selfhood, truth, and spirituality in ordinary experience. Accounts of the everyday orientations of the born again—be they Catholics-turned-Pentecostal in Latin America (Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997), Hindus-turned-Pentecostal in KwaZulu-Natal (Hansen 2006), or socialists-turned-Pentecostal in Central Europe (Wanner 2007)—make evident that their lived horizons are minimally shaped by modernist conceptions of work, nation, and development. In their personal circumstances, metaphysical forces seem more palpable in the pattern of unfolding events than do intangible forces such as society, economy, and history. In fact, the conditions that underwrote the plausibility (Berger 1967) of these larger concrete abstractions and fed a belief that humanity could author its own destiny seem to be eroding on a global scale, especially in places where bourgeois Western European hegemonies never fully displaced rather different axioms of existence. As Malaysian Methodist theologian Hwa Yung notes (1995: 2): “There is even less reason today for non-Western Christians ... to allow their theologies to be domesticated by Enlightenment thinking, something which Western Christians themselves find increasingly dissatisfying.”

**A Stone We Can Touch: Or, St. Paul on Ground Zero**

As already noted, a prominent feature of recently reborn faiths is the centrality of revelation. How, if at all, might this be connected to recent changes in the economy, society, and ontology? In reflecting on the co-existence in the US of neo-liberal political rationality with neo-conservatism, Wendy Brown (2003)
invokes Michel Foucault’s 1979 lectures on the “birth of bio-politics” at the Collège de France, in which he sought to distinguish neo-liberalism from its Smithian precursor. Foucault’s key insight concerned the differing relationship of the state to the economy: whereas in classic liberalism the state directed and monitored the workings of the economy, the neo-liberal turn makes “the market itself the organizing and regulative principle underlying the state” (Foucault quoted in Brown 2003). If it means anything at all as creed, neo-liberalism centers on the effort to extend market values to all domains of social action. By these lights, enhancing entrepreneurial profitability and promoting self-producing citizens have become both the end and the measure of good statecraft. Like the new religious movements we have been discussing, this mode of governance seeks to break down the separations between moral, economic, and political institutions, and to threaten the relative autonomy once enjoyed by each of these distinct spheres. This autonomy was, after all, the hallmark of modern liberal democracies. In undermining rationalities and moralities beyond the market, a process speeded by the effects of globalization and deterritorialization, neo-liberal administrations, especially in the US, have gone a long way toward dissolving the independent bases from which to mount a critique of laissez-faire and its co-option of politics. A similar point has been made by critical theologians about the extent to which economic theory has become the guide for spiritual enhancement in prosperity-oriented denominations. By making Christian dictates synonymous with those of the prevailing society, Greg Newton (2006) asserts, God’s people lose their unique identity: “Is there nothing about our free-market economy,” he asks, “that God’s Reign questions?” In collapsing the distinction between church and world, Pentecostals risk losing the key tension between faith and its context, a distinction that allows each to hold the other accountable. Certainly, the extension of economic rationality has eroded what we might term, after Hegel, an ethics of social responsibility. This perhaps explains why advocates of liberal governance and a politics of redistribution are having such difficulty framing ideological positions from which to oppose deregulation and the advance of corporate interests within nation-states on both sides of the Atlantic, even when they foster serious economic crisis.

Neo-conservatives and revitalized religious creeds have energetically seized the ground once held by a discredited humanist ethics. In an age of eroding sovereignty, they offer absolute moral certitudes and ultimate accountability. In the space ‘between Jesus and the market’, they favor forms of government that are strong on protecting the liberty of commerce and the authority of the church and are weak on a politics of secular social engineering and reform (cf. Connolly n.d.: 24–25; Kintz 1997). While their endorsement of getting-and-spending seems a world away from Weber’s Puritans, advocates of free-market faith share the belief that profit is proof of divine design. “I take all I have as a gift from God,” says best-selling apocalyptic author Tim LaHaye. “I don’t see that God puts any priority on poverty” (Boston 2002). There are echoes here of Luther (Weber 1930: 160) and of St. Paul’s indifference toward the world—at least as regards an ethics of social redistribution.
More than one observer has seen the reactivation of the spirit of St. Paul in the theologico-political culture of our times. For Alain Badiou (2003), the significant thing about Paul’s ‘anti-philosophy’ was that it was rooted in revelation, in the witnessing of an inimical event, an end that is also a beginning. Badiou insists that he reads Paul’s revelation not primarily as an act of faith but as the foundation for a new conception of universal truth that goes “beyond evident differences and separations” (Miller 2005: 42). Born-again believers, too, find foundational truth in personal revelation, the physical experience of being ‘filled with the Spirit’—a rupture that breaks with delusions past and fosters religious devotion with its inimical power. Thus captured, the faithful seek ways to perpetuate the in-dwelling presence in word and deed. As actors and agents of inspired ‘new life’, they inhabit a world of immanent superhuman force. They have become direct bearers of divine grace, just as their opponents are the avatars of Satan. “Colorado Springs … is spiritual Gettysburg,” declares a worker at the evangelical World Prayer Center in the town. “I am a warrior for God” (Sharlet 2005: 47). Here the spirit of St. Paul meets the ghost of anti-liberal writers like Carl Schmitt (1985: xx), who rejected “liberal normativism” for the rediscovery of a passionate politics of friend versus enemy, of the exceptional and the miraculous (ibid.) that returns the power of “non-rational” transcendence to dispassionate secular governance. It is the kind of passion evoked by exceptional events like 9/11, which for many people in America and beyond was the ground zero of a new age of global terror, insecurity, and innocence lost. It was an end that was also a beginning, a trauma that must be made the stuff of redemption, an apocalyptic threat to civilization that justifies all countervailing means. Here, as Spinoza ([1670] 1883: 42) insisted long ago, revelation and critical reason stand on “different footings.”

Revelation, then, is an event out of time. Its white heat re-establishes truth, realigns words and things, stems semiotic drift. Of course, the quest for original truth (e.g., the desire to return Christianity to what it was before the institutional church) pulls against the hermeneutic impetus in most traditions. In the majority, the pendulum swings between moments of exegesis and purification. In the space of Euro-modernity, in the “void left by the absence of the Gods” (Foucault 1978), human beings became their own measure, seeking to explore their own being rationally, relationally, to understand themselves as interpreters of the world, makers of history. Secular modes of knowing have been beset by crises of authority since the dawn of the Enlightenment. Yet the rapidly increasing scale and abstraction of life under neo-liberal conditions has drastically eroded the assumptions that underpinned modernist understandings of social existence. Intellectual elites remark on the ‘crisis of representation’ or the scourge of relativism, while people in everyday situations lose faith in surface appearances and accepted canons of evidence, especially where civic order has imploded, where currencies are drastically devalued, and where corruption and fakery seem ubiquitous. From Russia to Rwanda, people in such circumstances suspect that occult forces are at work: witches, surreal mafiosi, demonic terrorists, or what Kenyan Pentecostals call ‘Satan the deceiver’ (Blunt 2004; Geschiere 1997; Humphrey 1999). They find solace in those who promise
to ‘out’ the arcane, to stabilize value, and to return a counterfeit world to one of transparency, enforceable rules, and unambiguous meanings. What is more, in Pentecostal churches, rebirth into God’s truth and blessing is not a pacific experience. Rather, it empowers those reborn in the Spirit to go forth and strive for this-worldly dominion.

**Privatizing the Millennium**

On the face of it, such a pragmatic, this-worldly focus would seem to be at odds with the millennialism associated with born-again Christianity—especially the pre-millennialist belief in the imminence of the End Times espoused by many Pentecostals in the US and beyond. As Susan Harding (1994: 15–16) explains, most American pre-millennialists (or “dispensationalists”) are “futurist” not “historic” in orientation, that is, they separate the end of history into two distinct periods: the present, in which biblical prophecies are not being fulfilled, and the future, in which they will be. Until quite recently, dispensational Christians believed that their only role in bringing on the Second Coming was to save souls. But since the 1980s, preachers like Tim LaHaye and Jerry Falwell have distinguished “a new kind of time,” one in which the Last Days are seen to be less hopelessly regressive (Harding 1994: 33). With this shift in emphasis, God is held to have called upon all Christians to become active in wresting their country and way of life away from threats such as liberal humanism. Followers will be judged according to the way that they respond.

This altered view of redemption in time seems to have ensured that born-again Protestants become more central to the political and cultural life of late-twentieth-century America. To be sure, a revived sense of Christian agency—and urgency—accords with the revitalized world-making, the sense of activism-in-time that I have been documenting here. Harding (1994) argues for an expanded definition of political action to encompass this born-again pragmatism, but she stops short of embracing the material dimension so significant in the movements we have been exploring. Yet the window opened up by pre-millennial reform jibes with both the presentism and pragmatism presumed by those who seek to shape market forces to the purpose of producing Christian value, those happy to hitch business to the pursuit of God’s kingdom on earth. Hence the return of interest, mentioned earlier, in Christian Political Economy (Marty 1991), and in reconciling the ethics of faith with the workings of free-market enterprise. Advocates of the gospel of prosperity are simply the most literal in communicating a much more widely shared sensibility: many mainline denominations embody this same ethos in practice. North American and European Catholic Churches, for example, currently send Mass Intentions (requests for prayers to be said on behalf of a person, living or dead) to clergy in Kerala—mainly by e-mail. Here, in a process of devotional outsourcing, the prayers are performed by low-paid priests at about one-fifth the cost in the West. A spokesman for the British union Amicus excoriated the practice: “[It] shows that no aspect of life in the West is sacred,” he chided. But the truth
is perhaps the reverse: that all aspects of the world—not least, the creativity of the market—can be sacralized in the ‘here-and-now’ to serve the divine.

These features are perhaps most pronounced in what some have called the ‘fee-for-service’ faiths \(^{17}\) or the ‘market in Gods and services’ (Beit-Halahmi 2003) that flourish in many places, from Africa to Southeast Asia. Taiwanese roadside churches and shrines offer a menu of ritual services for drive-by patrons in a context where religion has long been involved in commercial transactions of all kinds (Weller 2000). Southern African congregations of the Universal Church, like the one in central Mafikeng, North West Province, frequently meet in downtown storefronts where they offer similar daily specials and services, including cures for AIDS, depression, and witchcraft; financial counseling; and advice and guidance for the unemployed. Such churches have regular members, but much of their business is with itinerant clients—customers, really—who select the benefits they require. Here, Pentecostalism blends directly with neo-liberal enterprise. Even the smallest sanctuaries have powerful sound systems, their upbeat music beckoning the public at large. Street-facing windows display the beaming faces and testimonials of those who have found rapid health, wealth, and happiness by responding to the call.

The ability to deliver in the here-and-now, a potent form of space-time compression, bears witness to God’s contract with the faithful, just as riches in the hands of the faithless are evidence of the powers of Satan. Both promise the instant efficacy of the magical and the millennial, this being the phenomenon with which I began—that is, the active presence of the supernatural in the mundane world. In the Universal Church, and in others that preach the gospel of prosperity, worship is often an emotive effort to arouse the spirit. Communal prayer is a cacophony of voices, each supplicant striving, in the first person singular, to draw down the force of the divine through the depth of his or her faith and need. Visions of blessing bespeak a privatized millennium, a personalized rather than a communal sense of rebirth. Eternal questions of suffering, bafflement, and hopelessness are addressed here in an idiom at once old and new, that of the power of faith, and of the certainty that material sacrifice will yield a quick, fulsome response. If John Wesley’s sermons on the precious stewardship of money echoed the labor theory of value, the language of Godly enterprise in Pentecostal liturgy is more likely to mimic the logic of finance capital. Pastors urge their congregations to believe that investment in the Lord will yield rich dividends, vying with competing options to offer ever more immediate returns on spiritual venture capital.

As noted elsewhere (J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff 2000), this quality plays on the optimistic millennialism that has always been inherent in capitalism, a millennialism that has been enhanced with the return of laissez-faire in its fundamentalist form. To the degree that this is a moment of significant social rearrangement, of ideological shift, of revival, it fuses the pre-modern and the postmodern, hope and hopelessness, possibility and impossibility—precisely the juxtaposition associated with cargo cults and revitalization movements in other times and places (Cohn 1957; Worsley 1957). This redemptive promise lends itself to a range of domestic versions, appealing across a wide social
spectrum to those tuned to a new sense of Pentecostal agency at the end of times; to those shaped by a culture of late-capitalist impatience with the postponed rewards of an older faith; to those left out of the promise of prosperity, who look in on the riches of the global economy from its exteriors. The neo-liberal turn held out the millennial prospect that everyone would be free to accumulate and speculate, to consume and indulge repressed desires. Yet for the majority, the millennium has passed without visible enrichment. For the excluded—those who call themselves the ‘poors’ in post-apartheid South Africa (Desai 2002), for instance—the citadels of power and privilege seem as impregnable as ever.

Conclusion

In many ways, as I have stated, none of this is new. In the Protestant Ethic, Weber (1930: 175) italicizes a passage from Wesley: “We must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich.” Weber saw the Protestant ethic as sanctifying the maximizing ethos of early industrial society and nurturing its habits. Are we not witnessing a later chapter in the same long story of the kinship between evangelicalism and capitalism?

The answer is yes—and no. The historical relationship of Protestantism to capitalism is both less privileged and more complex than Weber allowed. For one thing, his long-term telos has not been born out: the prediction that capitalism would develop a secular autonomy, free from the need for Godly reinforcement, has proved wrong. It is evident that there was a more intrinsic connection between capitalism and various strains of Protestantism, not to mention Catholicism and Judaism, than Weber acknowledged. All contributed to the contingent mix that congealed as industrial capitalism in the West and its various empires, and all were drawn up into the new forms of value and personal being produced by these formations. What is more, all three strains of faith were transformed—‘modernized’—by their give-and-take with capitalism as a realized social order; by the impact of its stress on popular literacy and entextualization; by the effects of the commodification it spawned; and by the rise of liberal politico-legal institutions that secured its terms of operation in a secular domain increasingly set off from that of organized religion. But while each of these faiths was transformed in particular, context-specific ways in relation to state and civil society, the dialectic of religion and economy was never severed in the manner implied by more literal understandings of ‘disenchantment’.

But I have also argued that many of the features of contemporary Pentecostalism are in fact new, and that they share attributes with other revitalized faiths beyond the Christian fold. Moreover, I have tried to show that these developments are not merely endorsements or ‘reflections’ of free-market forms: they are reciprocally entailed with economic forces in the thoroughgoing structural reorganization I have identified in the current moment. These forces include the expanding scale and abstraction of transactions across the globe, the growing tension between mobile capital and the nation-state, the increasing disparities
of wealth and power in the world at large, and the erosion of the institutional forms of liberal democracy. This unsettlement does not occur everywhere in the same way. Secular liberal hegemonies seem less vulnerable in north-west Europe than elsewhere, although there are signs that they too are being disturbed from below. The institutional separations associated with modern bureaucratic states—the complementarity of the sacred and profane, public and private, state and society—are being cross-cut by renewed forms of theodicy, by totalizing religious authorities that promise to anchor abstraction, fix sovereignty, and yield new agglomerations that are at once pre- and post-modern. The spirit of revelation is among us once more, resonating ironically with the ethos of our late-secular age—the compression of space and time, the sense of urgency and expectation, the longing for the sublime. The genius of the new holistic faiths is to address the displacements and desires of the current world, to make its pathologies and terrors the portents of imminent transcendence. As the circumstances that rendered liberal humanism plausible are increasingly undermined, it is incumbent on social critics—both within and beyond the religious field—to make cogent sense of this history-in-the-making.

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Notes

1. Some sections of this article appeared in abridged form in an online essay in the *Caterwaul Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2008).
5. Theresa (Terri) Marie Schindler Schiavo was an American woman who, after suffering extensive brain damage in February 1990, becoming dependent on a feeding tube and was institutionalized for eight years in what was diagnosed as a “persistent vegetative state.” Her husband and legal guardian petitioned the Circuit Court in Pinellas County, Florida, to remove her feeding tube. Schiavo’s parents opposed the petition, arguing that
their daughter remained conscious. Although the court determined that Schiavo would not wish to continue life-prolonging measures, religious leaders, politicians, and pro-life advocacy groups became involved, and the battle continued for seven years. Before the local court’s decision was finally carried out on 18 March 2005, efforts were made by the Florida state government and the US federal government to intervene. The struggle received extensive national and international media coverage (see Caplan, McCartney, and Sisti 2006).

6. See also evangelical discussions of sexuality-as-godliness, such as the bestseller The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love, by Tim LaHaye and Beverly LaHaye ([1976] 1998); cf. Linda Kintz (1997). William Connolly (n.d.: 28) has gone so far as to speak of the “Christian-family-eroticism” formula in the contemporary United States.


8. Interview with the founding pastor.

9. This is evident not merely in the challenge of what might be construed as immigrant religiosity in Western Europe (recall here the controversial remarks by the Archbishop of Canterbury to the effect that adoption of some aspects of Sharia law for relevant communities “seems unavoidable” (“Sharia Law in UK is ‘Unavoidable’,” BBC Radio 4 World at One, 7 February 2008). The introduction of the Human Fertilization and Embryo Bill into the British Parliament in the spring of 2008 drew unprecedented levels of home-grown Christian activism and evoked considerable media attention. One extended BBC report noted that “[h]ard-line Christian activists are now mobilizing believers in an attempt to make an impact on society nationally,” adding that “well funded and politically active Christian groups [are] emerging as a significant voice in British politics” (In God’s Name, Channel 4 Dispatches, 19 May 2008, 8:00 pm).

10. The Dubai Ports World controversy was a high-profile dispute that took place from February to March 2006 between the US and the United Arab Emirates. The issue was whether the sale of businesses managing six major US seaports to Dubai Ports World (DPW), a company owned by the government of Dubai, would compromise American state security. The business had earlier been owned by a British company, the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O), which had been purchased by DPW at the time of the controversy. As a result of the deal, DPW would assume the leases of P&O to manage 6 major US port facilities, as well as operations in 16 others. The transfer of leases had been approved by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, but Democratic and Republican members of the US Congress started to question it after the Associated Press published a story suggesting that the arrangement constituted a threat to national security. After a House Panel voted 62–2 to block the deal, DPW released a statement saying that it would turn over operation of the ports to a US “entity” (Yasin 2006).


13. Larry King is one of America’s best-known talk show hosts. His globally syndicated program, Larry King Live, is CNN’s most watched offering and is said to draw over one million viewers per night.

14. Badiou does acknowledge, though, that there has been a ‘religious co-opting’ of his work. He counters that in light of the significant issues at stake in our current world, the difference between “the religious way and the non-religious way” is relatively trivial (Miller 2005: 42).

15. See, for example, Stapleford (2002: 134) on the “intermediate” nature of private property in relation to the divine ownership of all things.
16. It is reported that this outsourcing is mainly routed through the Vatican. In Kerala, priests earn about $45 per month, and the extra income is welcomed.” See Rai (2004).
17. Scholars have noted the prevalence of spirit medium shrines and other popular religious forms that operate on a fee-for-service basis in China and Vietnam (e.g., Weller 2000).

References


