



## Article

# Salvation as Cultural Distinction: Religion and Neoliberalism in Urban Africa

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## Abstract

Intervening in debates on religion and social inequalities, this article advocates a shift from concerns with economic ethics to a focus on religious belonging as embodying class-based cultural distinctions. In the first part, I critically review the literature that draws inspiration from Weber's concept of Protestant inner-worldly asceticism and advance two arguments: Pentecostal orientations toward this-worldly salvation thwart rationalising potentials and feed into magic, or "occult," economies instead. Simultaneously, however, Pentecostalism promotes personal autonomy by emphasising the possibilities for radical personal change through conversion and becoming "born again." In the second part, I draw on Bourdieu's cultural sociology and show that personal autonomy and certain images of Pentecostal modernity are increasingly deployed within practices of cultural distinction between the modern Pentecostal and economically successful and the backward who remain locked in the past. The article is based on ethnographic research among Pentecostals in South Africa as well as a review of the literature on other African societies.

## Keywords

Africa, cultural distinction, economic development, Pierre Bourdieu, religion

## Introduction

Throughout much of the 20th century, sociological theories of modernisation and economic development assumed that economic growth was both contingent upon and furthered secularisation, i.e. the decline of religious beliefs and practices and their social relevance. During the last two decades, however, sociologists have begun to critically review these assumptions (see Burchardt et al., 2013). In this context, macro-quantitative studies have tended to defend the idea of a close relationship between secularisation and

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economic development (Norris and Inglehart, 2011) and have suggested that religious decline actually precedes economic growth (Ruck et al., 2018). Comparative institutional accounts as well as qualitative studies, by contrast, have drawn attention to the case of the USA (Casanova, 2006) as well as emerging economies such as South Korea (Kern, 2001), Brazil (Lehmann, 1996), or Indonesia (Hefner, 2000), where economic growth has not been paralleled by religious decline. They have emphasised the particularities of European pathways to modernity arguing that, rather than a blueprint for developments elsewhere in the world, Europe is in fact the exceptional case (Berger et al., 2008).

In this article, I contribute to this scholarship by focusing on Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity and its relationship with economic processes and social inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa. The continuing rise of this type of Christianity across Africa makes such an analysis all the more urgent, and has animated lively debates among sociologists and anthropologists about the usefulness of the concepts Max Weber laid out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1905), in particular his notion of inner-worldly asceticism. Among other things, this debate has thrived on the apparent parallelism between the deepening presence and rising political significance of charismatic Christianity and the economic dynamism of some African countries, which has fed into popular discourses on “Afro-Optimism” and “Africa Rising” (Onuoha, 2016). These economic dynamics also seem to propel the emergence of new African middle classes (Kroeker et al., 2018; Southall, 2016; Spronk, 2014). However, the religious commitments of these middle classes as the supposed drivers of change have been left largely unexplored.

My aim is to critically review this literature in the light of ethnographic data gathered intermittently since 2006 through fieldwork in the townships of the South African city of Cape Town, as well as ethnographic accounts from other African countries. This review leads me to the conclusion that in order to account for the changing relationships between religion and social inequality in urban Africa, Weber’s theory of inner-worldly asceticism should be complemented by a Bourdieusian approach to practices of cultural distinction. My argument is that, for reasons I will outline, in urban Africa, Pentecostal Christianity does not generate economic attitudes that lead to economic upward mobility but an elaborated system of signs meant to signal one’s status of being saved and “born again”. Within this system of signs, displays of wealth and consumerism are central and demonstrate how religion operates as a form of cultural distinction. Therefore, Pentecostalism does not so much produce economic success as it deploys its manifestations as symbolic resources in formulating claims on religious superiority. Pursuing this line of argument, I also hope to show how in Africa religion is a crucial dimension of the systems of cultural differences that structure societies on the horizontal level. While the vertical differentiation of social inequalities places people per se in a hierarchical order, cultural identities, styles and practices have to be differentially valued in order to be hierarchically ordered and to serve as mechanisms to produce or fix inequalities. Pentecostalism is a major cultural force in this regard.

## Max Weber in Africa?

Religious revitalisations and the emergence of new religious movements have stimulated criticisms of secularisation theories since at least the 1980s, while questions regarding

their relationships to economic life have triggered renewed engagements with classical economic sociology, in particular Weber's (1905) account on "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." Developing his arguments in conversation with historical economists (Sombart, 1902) as well as Marx's historical materialism, Weber argued that Calvinism had a decisive influence on the emergence of modern capitalism in Northern Europe. Calvinists believed that God had already and irrevocably decided about people's fate in the afterlife, which was therefore predestined, and that they had the duty to dispel doubts about their own election. While they were thus unable to affect their state of salvation by their own means, they were left with the option of trying to find signs of it. In this context, they interpreted success in business life as one such sign, while at the same time radically despising worldly pleasures and consumption. As a result, they had no option but to reinvest their wealth in new business ventures and garner economic profit for its own sake. According to Weber, this situation propelled the development of a thoroughly rationalised conduct of life as a special kind of inner-worldly asceticism, and subsequently a broader process of rationalisation that was unparalleled and unique in human history.

In the wake of the dramatic transformations of Protestantism that Pentecostalism wrought, prominent sociologists such as Peter L. Berger (2010, 2014) and David Martin (2002) argued that Weber's theory could usefully be applied to non-western contexts. As a revivalist movement, Pentecostalism emerged in the early 20th century in the USA but quickly traveled and became popular in other parts of the world. It is a form of Christianity that places maximum emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit in directly affecting people's lives and is characterised by a strong proselytising impulse. Converts and believers are expected to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior and seek a state of salvation through rituals of conversion, which are often dramatic and ecstatic enactments of radical personal transformation in which people are "born again in Christ" (Marshall, 2009). Aesthetically exuberant and rigorously participatory, Pentecostal religious practices are emotionally charged performances of sacred force, and people turn to them for protection against evil forces, in particular witchcraft, as well as healing from afflictions (Burchardt, 2015). These range from disturbed family and kin relations and physical illness, to lack of success in business and sexual dissatisfaction. In general, Pentecostal worldviews are radically Manichean, sharply dividing the world into zones of light and of darkness – zones which are ruled by Jesus Christ and charismatic pastors who have received the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and zones governed by Satan where sin is rampant on the other (Meyer, 1999).

Martin (2002) suggested that in Latin American societies, Pentecostalism has been especially successful among socially disadvantaged sections of the populace because it has offered families avenues for economic improvement and upward social mobility. The social context in which these observations gained traction was the rampant culture of *machismo*, in which husbands and fathers were often absent from their families, providing household income through illicit businesses rather than regular work, but also diminishing household resources through massive spending on gambling, drugs, alcohol, and prostitutes; spending which was certainly non-productive and hedonistic. Conversion to and membership in Pentecostal congregations seemed to reverse this situation. In general, Pentecostal religious life is driven by the zealous pursuit of strict moralities in

which everything that *macho husbands* desire is frowned upon, forbidden, and negatively sanctioned. Pentecostals put maximum emphasis on the values of sexual faithfulness and nuclear family life and see drugs, alcohol, and prostitution as the work of the devil. Significantly, Pentecostalism has appeared particularly attractive to women because it has empowered them in religious terms, offering them possibilities of religious agency that they were hitherto denied. Puzzled by the apparent popularity of Pentecostalism as a patriarchal religion among women, which Berenice Martin (2001) called the “Pentecostal gender paradox,” researchers have suggested that conversion to this form of Christianity has given women the necessary tools to domesticate men. The result is that women have gained more control over their own affairs and family life, gradually becoming less dependent on their husbands and less inclined to submit to their authority and control.

Based on similar observations among Colombian Pentecostals, Elizabeth Brusco (1986) dubbed Pentecostal practices the “Reformation of Machismo.” Fundamentally, Brusco, Martin, and other anthropologists (Gill, 1990) suggested that conversion to Pentecostalism has a *disciplinary* effect on people’s lives which mainly works by reforming models of masculinity and femininity, and that the reformation of gender models in turn positively impacts upon household economies and livelihoods. Peter L. Berger (2010: 4) famously took up these ideas, arguing that African (and Latin American) forms of Pentecostalism operate in terms largely analogous to historical Calvinism, and insisting that the “attitudes and behavior of the new Pentecostals bear a striking resemblance to their Anglo-Saxon predecessors ... This new culture is certainly “ascetic.”

In the following part of this article, I discuss these claims in the light of ethnographic observations. My empirical work focuses on a sample of small Pentecostal church communities in the township of Khayelitsha. Located about twenty kilometers southeast of the center of Cape Town<sup>1</sup> and home to more than 500,000 residents, Khayelitsha is one of the impoverished townships that developed on the outskirts of Cape Town, particularly from the mid-1980s onwards, when the infamous apartheid pass laws and restrictions on residence rights for non-white South Africans were gradually lifted. Although it has been formally recognised as a township since the 1980s, a massive influx of Xhosa migrants from the Eastern Cape Province and the former homeland of Transkei has fostered the endless sprawl of informal settlements. Makeshift shacks made of wooden panels and corrugated iron began to occupy the hitherto empty corridors along National Highway 2. In 2011, roughly 53% of Khayelitsha’s residents lived in informal settlements. At the same time, however, clear signs of social stratification have emerged, with some parts of the township lifted to middle-class status.

My fieldwork has involved long-term participant observation among the members of three Pentecostal churches including families and youth groups (often called “cell groups”). I conducted problem-centered interviews with around 60 pastors, as well as peer educators, religious activists and volunteers, project managers working on behalf of five different faith-based organisations, as well as members of all those groups of people at whom their efforts are directed. Some individuals were interviewed several times. I conducted participant observation in HIV prevention workshops, outreach campaigns, support group meetings, public rallies, school-based life-skills education classes, and

group discussions with participating youth. The data analysis was guided by the principle of triangulation as this seemed the most suitable way of uncovering practices of distinction and the embodied dispositions underlying them.

## **Body, Gender, and Sexuality: Does Pentecostalism Have Disciplinary Effects?**

South Africa is one of the countries that have been most strongly affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Issues of sexuality and gender relations therefore have a huge presence in political debates, policy making, media discourses, and private conversations. Massive public health programs have been launched to reform sexual practices and sexual decision-making, and it is in this peculiar context that Pentecostal discourses and moral teachings around sexuality have been framed and have acquired greater public attention since the mid-2000s (Burchardt, 2011). But how important are family values to South African Pentecostals, and to what extent do they influence people's behavior?

In general, teachings about sexuality, responsibility, and family life have been central to Pentecostal discourse, but they have been more prominent in the social action groups and "faith-based organisations" which some churches founded in order to carry out their social activities than in the church communities themselves (Burchardt, 2013). In this context, Pentecostals developed elaborate discourses about responsible love, the pleasures of sexuality within the confines of heterosexual marriage, premarital abstinence, and marital faithfulness. As Pentecostals in Khayelitsha were exposed to these messages over the years, they became habituated to them. One outcome of people's negotiation of these messages was that they were not only perfectly able to rehearse Pentecostal moral tenets on all kinds of occasions, but they had also incorporated a commitment to these tenets in all forms of moral self-presentation in everyday life. In other words, Pentecostal moral exhortations led to a proliferation of situations in which believers engaged in particular moral performances that validated faithfulness and family values as central to their biographical and ethical projects. In these situations, Pentecostals engaged in practices of cultural distinction marking themselves as "moderns" for whom the wisdoms of biomedical prevention teachings *proved* the truth of their religious beliefs. They dismissed the so-called "AIDS denialists" as uneducated and backward. Trained and inculcated at numerous occasions, the distinct cultural style of these Pentecostal "moderns" allowed them to accumulate cultural capital – the vast numbers of certificates proving successful participation in training courses that adorn most houses of the Pentecostal "moderns" in Khayelitsha – as well as social capital, which facilitated their entry into the world of NGOs, civil society and social service bureaucracies.

However, performances of moral self-presentation that reflect the cultural habitus of the Pentecostal "moderns" and practices of dating and eroticism have clearly been decoupled. On numerous occasions, it was obvious that young members of Pentecostal churches participated – if to a lesser degree than non-"born agains" – in township events in which erotic encounters were taking place and sexual relationships initiated. There are in fact numerous social forces that mediate and refract the possible influences of religion on sexual practices, entailed in popular and academic assumptions about linear connections

between religious membership and sexual life style. As a result, direct influences of Pentecostal moral discourses on sexual behavior are rare, even amongst strongly committed young Pentecostals.

The main reason for this is that in the highly dynamic context of urban South Africa, Christian notions of premarital abstinence compete with cultural orientations toward romantic love and neo-traditionalist understandings of sex. Against this backdrop, premarital abstinence stands out as a possible but highly *exceptional* approach to sex. This in turn has to do with the fact that, at least in metropolitan Cape Town, Pentecostalism does not enforce separation of its followers according to their lifestyle. Pentecostal youths include nominal as well as strongly committed adherents, and both tend to traverse and be embraced by the same erotic geographies as other young people, unless family religiosity provides for major social continuity. This may lead to a situation in which religion and sexual culture exist as two relatively separate domains despite Pentecostal church leaders' endeavors to define sexual virtuousness as central to being "born again."

Within these erotic geographies, however, sexuality and intercourse rarely appear as reified objects to be chosen or rejected. They are rather embedded in sophisticated strategies of dating and progressing in which concerns with romancing and faithfulness are much more essential than issues of marriage or sin. In this context, faith-based sexual education and HIV-prevention programs focusing on premarital abstinence may fall on deaf ears. They confirm what (some) firm believers have known all along but, namely that despite all efforts to speak the language of youth, they have not succeeded in engaging with the material and cultural structures in which conceptions and practices of dating and sexuality are shaped.

Thus, while I found little support for Berger's hypothesis on Pentecostalism's disciplinary effect on intimate life, a more important question relating to the management of family resources has emerged. As Hunter's studies (Hunter, 2002, 2010) have shown, diverse forms of concurrent multiple partnerships in which comparatively well-endowed men financially support several women and their offspring continue to be prevalent in contemporary South Africa. The concentration of income in one, as opposed to several, households would likely have a positive effect on trajectories of upward social mobility among these families. But does Pentecostalism further such a concentration of resources? The ethnographic record is decidedly mixed. Whereas Garner (2000) found that Pentecostals had a smaller number of sexual partners than members of other religious communities, I found these differences to be attenuated by a high degree of fluidity in membership.

Similarly, in her study of Pentecostalism in urban Madagascar, Cole (2012: 387) found that "the argument that Pentecostalism changes men's behavior did not appear to apply to most of the cases I encountered" and that across the board "it was wives and not husbands who participated in the church." Cole argued that "Pentecostalism helps these women less by reforming their men and changing their behavior than by offering women an alternative source of authority, as well as an alternative set of social practices, from which to forge social personhood and a subjective sense of self" (Cole, 2012: 388). There are echoes here of Soothill's (2007) study in Ghana who found that women were drawn



into Pentecostalism not because it empowered them as women but because it provided them with a sense of spiritual agency.

While my data have largely confirmed Cole's and Soothill's findings, and while I agree with their analyses, I suggest that this work can be enriched by paying attention to class-based differences. In Cape Town as well, there is little indication that conversion and the Pentecostal moralisation of everyday life has led to the kind of domesticating effect, followed by upward mobility, that sociologists have suggested. But even in the more affluent sections of the townships, and even more so among the upwardly mobile who have moved into the more expensive areas around Table Mountain in the city, the commitment to Pentecostalism, though not stronger in a general sense, has been coupled with a sense of personal achievement and with what Eva Illouz (2008) construed as the therapeutic ethos of romantic love. It was precisely middle-class Christians who would express their emotional and ethical commitment to heterosexual love in the dramatic terms in which they talked about their commitment to Jesus Christ. Following this observation, I suggest that, rather than levers of change in sexual relationships and sexual habitus, Pentecostal idioms are semantic elaborations on ideals of sexual selfhood.

However, deviations from heterosexual monogamy are not exclusively private practices shielded from public scrutiny. On 31 May 2014, the Pentecostal pastor of the Living Word Tabernacle Church, Themba Dumisani Mathibela, had to appear in the Khayelitsha Magistrate Court because of rape charges brought by two women from his own congregation. One of the victims claimed that the pastor raped her for the first time in 2012, impregnating her, and that she was forced by Mathibela to give the baby up for adoption.<sup>2</sup> Another victim told the media: "I did not want to give the child away. He made me sign the papers. He arranged for all this to happen and acted as my pastor and not the father of the child. Yes he raped me. He had asked me to abort the child but I refused."<sup>3</sup> In addition, both women claimed that the pastor had threatened to use his spiritual powers against them after one of them refused to have sex with him, and especially if they spoke out about the case. Mathibela, on the contrary, denied having threatened them, claiming that the sexual intercourse was consensual, and pleaded innocent, asking to be released on bail as he was the breadwinner for his family. At the time, he had five children including a four-month-old baby.

As the trial continued, a group of four more women appeared before the court and later in the audience. All of them claimed to have had sexual relationships with the pastor. They emphasised that these relations were not only consensual, but legitimate. This is why they had come to support "their pastor." In one of the hearings, the pastor's wife, who was also present in the courtroom, was apparently taken by surprise concerning her husband's extended sexual circles and broke down in the middle of the hearing. Initially, the judge opposed the bail, arguing that the pastor's presence could have a negative impact on the local community and that his safety might be at risk. It was also feared that he might interfere with the proceedings after he told journalists that he knew influential lawyers and magistrates and would make it impossible for the victims to prove their story.

This case was remarkable; while Mathibela had clearly violated Christian moral principles of monogamy and marital faithfulness, he defended his actions as legitimate. Many of my female informants, however, had long suspected that certain men used their

participation in church life as a way of meeting and having sex with women, and that pastors were no exception to this. However, in other cases, pastors typically denied charges of sexual misconduct so as to uphold unchangeable Christian laws. Mathibela, by contrast, did not show any sign of repentance to the public, treating his actions as expressions of a legitimate form of masculinity.

My argument is that, while much Christian discourse in sexual education is focused on the morality of abstinence and faithfulness, overall it does not have disciplinary effects observable on patterns of sexual relationships, which would enable economic mobility. The cultural significance of the Christian sexual pedagogies lies in that they develop new confessional technologies. Christians have powerfully contributed to a process of reimagining and reorganising ethical selfhood around concepts of sexual responsibility and personal worth when developing narratives of the self. In other words, they have turned sexuality into a concern with the whole person.

While pastors such as Mathibela reject the idea of sexual monogamy as a general rule for men and his story tellingly reveals the limits of Evangelical chastity, his notion of sexualised Pentecostal masculinity feeds into the dynamics that constitute sexuality as central to personhood. Based on these observations, we can see how the politics around sexuality facilitates the emergence of two distinct types of Pentecostal habitus, i.e. two types of embodied dispositions: the “Pentecostal moderns” mentioned earlier and what we can call “Pentecostal traditionalists” such as Mathibela. For the Pentecostal moderns among my informants, the case of Mathibela once more proved what they had always abhorred in traditionalists, whom they saw as essentially backward, and in fact not Christian at all. Pentecostal traditionalists, by contrast, persistently emphasised the paramount value of unfettered male headship and their contempt for Pentecostal “moderns” whom they deemed westernised and effeminate. Importantly, Pentecostal “traditionalists” cultural habitus also accounts for the fact that they do not have the same kind of access to the world of NGOs and social services as Pentecostal “moderns” and therefore cultivate a distinct prestige economy. Gendered forms of habitus and especially masculinity have thus become a central playground of cultural distinction, in which people sort the “saved” and the “unsaved,” the “moderns” and the “traditionalists” (Burchardt, 2018). These distinctions, in turn, mediate and propel *affective* forms of cultural membership and belonging, forms through which people not only read the physical signs that make the habitus legible, but also feel who belongs to their world and who does not.

## Wealth and Money

One major element in the rationalisation of everyday Calvinist economic practices was a particular orientation toward the afterlife and the way it resulted in an inner-worldly asceticism. While there are similarities between Weber’s Calvinists and African Pentecostals insofar as both are deeply concerned with matters of business, wealth, and money, there are also major differences. Chiefly, Pentecostals believe in, and are oriented toward, salvation in *this life*, effectively inverting Weber’s description. While concerns with their fate after death are conspicuously absent from Pentecostal debates, work toward salvation is primarily a matter of sacrifice and prayer – practices which Weber saw as other-worldly-oriented – and Pentecostals emphatically believe in their ability to



influence their salvation. In addition, as Kirby (2019: 579) argues, “the power of Pentecostalism to shape practical conduct through particular techniques of self-fashioning is weaker than that of ascetic Protestantism because it vies with a concern for securing spiritual protection.”

One of the main theological currents underpinning this tendency is the rise of the so-called “prosperity gospel” among African Pentecostals, which many scholars view as indicative of a shift from “classical” to “Neo-Pentecostalism.” This shift has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on success in one’s business life and the notion that God wants people to prosper and be wealthy. The shift also involves the belief that the forces of Satan are what have prevented them from prospering and forced them to live in poverty (van Dijk, 2012). In the late 1980s, leaders of large West African Pentecostal churches began to publish books in which they described poverty as a curse (Ukah, 2005). The Redeemed Christian Church of God leader Adebayo, for instance, argued that God-willed material comfort implied:

Cars, houses, clothes, land, anything money can buy – material things! ... [Y]ou will have children, as many as you want, and you will have lots of money to take care of them. If you have any domestic animal – goat, sheep, poultry and cattle – God says they will keep on prospering. If you plant anything, it will come out very well. (quoted in Ukah, 2005: 260)

He further suggested that the Bible showed that God’s closest friends were wealthy and influential and that to be poor excluded one from friendship with God. Such messages were able to attract followers of different class backgrounds. They became popular among members of urban middle classes as they legitimated their economic success and wealth, and they attracted the urban poor as they held out promises regarding their own economic improvement. Worldly success and material wealth thus became ends in themselves and heavenly gifts to be enjoyed in this life (Kirby, 2019: 579).

In many African countries such discourses gained ground in the context of deteriorating national economies under state-led austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund. These resulted in deepening fractures in the ideological edifice of secular modernity producing a general sense that the promises of secular development would go unfulfilled (Ferguson, 2006). In Tanzania, the well-known Pentecostal pastor Mwakasege encouraged people to stop relying on the “worldly economy” and start believing in the power of the “heavenly economy” to fulfill their material desires instead (“quoted in” Hasu, 2006: 684). Thus, he claimed:

I know that God wants me to be successful in everything. And if you say that it is God’s will that you have not been successful I do not agree on that. God created man as his own image; God is not poor and therefore he did not create man as the image of the poor. Do you think God put these things, food, clothing and soap in the world for Satan and his people? Do you think that once we are in heaven we still need food, clothing and soap? God gave these things for us to use now. God is the one who gives man the power to gain wealth. God is the one who teaches man to make profit. Our God whom we worship is not a God of loss but a God of profit. (quoted in Hasu, 2006)

In her interesting study on Tanzania, Hasu (2012) discussed two different Pentecostal responses to neoliberalism: the endorsement of the market economy and prosperity

gospel among middle-class Pentecostals and the emphasis on healing among poor Pentecostals. She thus questioned the assumption that Pentecostals become successful in business by suggesting the inverse causal relation: those who are already successful are likely to favor churches which legitimate their wealth.

Economic reorientation and new theologies of wealth within Pentecostalism have had two further consequences. First of all, they have accompanied a proliferation of publications and debates on good business practices, encouraging followers to start their own private businesses (instead of relying on salaries) and introducing new hierarchies in which business leaders and private entrepreneurs are clearly at the top, routinely heralded as role models (van Dijk, 2010). In West Africa and Southern Africa, a whole new scene of business consultancy, counseling, and managerial writing has emerged from the growing Pentecostal field, such that the two are sometimes indistinguishable. Courses in business leadership and management are offered at churches by both successful pastors and by members who are leading businessmen. As a consequence, religious and economic elements have become increasingly interwoven.

Secondly, churches are increasingly conceived and managed as enterprises – in other words, as economic players in a competitive field treated as a market. Over time, well-to-do churches began to engage in expensive advertising campaigns in which they praised their church as an enterprise whose success not only demonstrated the abilities of their pastor (as their business leader) but also showed that only with the help of Jesus was it possible to prosper – both for the church, and for its individual followers. Some African-initiated Pentecostal churches have transformed into mega-churches, attracting thousands of followers to facilities the size of sports stadiums every week and opening branches in far-away countries including the USA, Ukraine, and Russia. Nigeria's Redeemed Christian Church of God also established a "Redemption Camp," the largest of a few hundred prayer camps that have sprung up in recent years (Ukah, 2016). Spanning several thousand acres, the camp involves middle- and upper-class housing estates which have been sold to families of church members. Financing, managing, and selling private homes, the church has effectively become a real-estate developer, a business which has further increased its already considerable wealth.

The most important aspect in which contemporary African Pentecostalism differs, *pace* Berger, from its Anglo-Saxon predecessors, is its understanding of the *sources* of wealth and their relationship to followers' agency. Primarily, Pentecostals understand wealth to be the result of God's reward to those who make sacrifices for him and who thus demonstrate their trust in his powers. The metaphors through which people's material success is explained in Pentecostal discourses across Africa is that of "sowing the seeds" and "reaping the fruits" of one's efforts, or "harvesting." In general, Pentecostals are expected to offer 10% of their monthly income as tithes (van Wyk, 2015). Larger churches frequently warn members to tithe correctly and actually offer tutorials and courses on correct tithing.

Significantly, pastors' calls for tithes are much less frequent and demanding in the small church communities of Khayelitsha. During the early 2000s, discourses and practices linked to the prosperity gospel were still largely unknown. However, since at least around 2010, practices of sacrifice have become more widespread in Cape Town. They have also become contested as the pastors of small churches in particular have denounced

practices of sacrifice as illicit personal enrichment and religiously sanctioned theft. In South Africa, public perception mainly associates practices of so-called “spontaneous sacrifice” or “special sacrifice” with the rising presence of churches of Nigerian and Brazilian origin. In his work on Nigerian Pentecostalism, Gifford (2015: 63) cites one follower as saying “When the Bishop made a call for the aircraft seed [to buy the bishop’s first private jet], I looked around for what to give as a sacrificial offering ... I decided to give a video player that was at least in a fair condition. It was after that offering that things started to change.”

The Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) has especially contributed to the popularisation of the prosperity gospel, exemplified, among other things, by the installing of ATM machines at the entrance of church buildings. In the context of so-called “Campaigns for Israel,” UCKG members pledge to sacrifice large sums of money, sometimes equivalent to their income of several months, which they then hand over to the pastor during spectacular final ceremonies. As van Wyk (2015) showed in her astute analysis of these campaigns,

the UCKG advocated a “two-step plan”, which purportedly obliged God to “work and meet [people’s] needs ... “Bringing the tithe” or “sacrifice” was the “first step to prosperity” while the second step was to “test God” by “demanding” your blessings. To “demand” required of believers to be forceful ... In church services, this meant that members had to raise their fists, shout and stamp their feet as they urged God to fulfill his part of their bargain. (van Wyk, 2015: 8).

In order to fulfill their pledges, people often have to find additional income through small jobs or even take out loans from private moneylenders. And as van Wyk (2015: 10) observed, “during the months of the campaign, pastors in church often warned participants that their families would try hard to divert their sacrifices with emotional pleas and urgent requests for financial assistance – even through witchcraft.” There is indeed a broader pattern in which the redirection of resources away from kinship networks into private businesses or Pentecostal churches by congregants is perceived among relatives as the refusal to fulfill traditional obligations of redistribution. Among those not belonging to Pentecostal churches, the pastors’ influence is often interpreted as created through illicit means, or involving evil forces; in other words, witchcraft. The wealthier pastors are, the more such conjectures and accusations flourish, and the more pastors insist that congregants need the power of the Holy Spirit – to be protected from witchcraft and the work of evil forces, which their conversion to charismatic Christianity is likely to prompt.

These observations show that, rather than reflecting disciplined attitudes toward rationalised work and propelling the rationalisation of economic processes, practices of sacrifice constitute magic economies (see also Coleman, 2011; Lindhardt, 2009; Meyer, 2007). In these economies, people invest money with the hope of magic returns, which prove their state of salvation. The apparent success of wealthy pastors is typically accepted as proof that with the help of the Holy Spirit, anything is possible. Importantly, as Gifford (2015: 60) argued, it is often explicitly not the “sweating work” but God’s blessings that make believers rich. Attempts to “test God” and the use of miracles as a central currency of exchange illustrate radical differences between Pentecostalism and Weberian notions of inner-worldly asceticism. Responding to similar observations, Jean

Comaroff (2012) suggested that Pentecostal fascinations with wealth and money are linked to the ways in which post-industrial business is itself becoming increasingly re-enchanted when, as in finance, value is created not through production but through sheer transaction. The uncanny resonances between contemporary high finance and longstanding African preoccupations with illegitimate wealth point to diverse formations of magic economies of which stock exchanges, witchcraft, and increasingly Pentecostalism are the most salient examples. Comaroff and Comaroff (2001: 26) usefully pointed to the inherent ambivalence of these economies: “At one level, they consist in the constant quest for new, magical means for otherwise unattainable ends; at another, they vocalize a desire to sanction, to demonize and eradicate people held to have accumulated assets by those very means. The salvific and the satanic are conditions of each other’s possibility.”

Following in the footsteps of the Comaroffs, Kirby (2019: 885) has argued that there are indeed “new elective affinities” between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism in that both thrive on notions of self-activation, entrepreneurialism, and economic success. Similarly, Barker (2007: 408) has argued that Pentecostalism, while being a reaction to neoliberalism, has the effect of embedding the neoliberal restructuring of society in social life by inculcating beliefs that correspond with the exigencies of neoliberalism. My suggestion is therefore that the significance of Pentecostal efforts to shape successful subjects does not and cannot reside in their efficacy but in its capacity to adapt people to neoliberalism and produce cultural dispositions that reproduce this cultural match between economic ideology and religious belief.

## **Toward a Cultural Sociology of Religious Distinction**

It is thus clear that there are close links between religion and economic inequalities in post-industrial sub-Saharan Africa, but the mechanisms through which they work differ from those suggested by Berger and others. And while the notion of the resonances between neoliberalism and Pentecostalism is highly pertinent, it begs the question of how they are actually produced. A useful avenue for theorising these productions is Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural distinction and his conceptualisation of religious fields. I suggest that they can be used as building blocks for a theory of religious distinction. In a nutshell, my argument is that, particularly in urban areas of African Christian-majority societies, membership in charismatic churches operates as a form of symbolic capital. Communicated through diverse performative and aesthetic practices and symbols to all kinds of audiences in everyday urban life, wealth and charismatic salvation are turned into mutually referencing metonyms that operate as markers of distinction.

In his theory of religious fields, Bourdieu (1991) suggests that there are ongoing struggles between religious powerholders and their contenders – typically priests and prophets – over the legitimate means of manipulating the sacred, whereby some groups are durably constituted as laity and dispossessed of their religious capital. Emerging religious hierarchies are defined by the distribution of symbolic capital, understood as an actor’s ability to ensure her or his capital and power is misrecognised by others and works precisely because it appears to be legitimate (see also Echtler and Ukah, 2016: 4). The religious field thus operates as “a system of consecrated practices and

representations whose structure (structured) reproduces, in a transfigured and therefore misrecognizable form, the structure of the economic and social relations in force in a determinate social formation” (Bourdieu, 1991: 14).

Significantly, the religious fields in most Sub-Saharan Africa societies, especially in western and southern Africa, are to a lesser degree characterised by stable forms of religious dispossession than France and Algeria, Bourdieu’s main points of reference. There are permanent outbursts of prophesy and religious heterodoxy, which work to empower some of the religiously dispossessed and disempower religious hierarchies. South Africa’s religious field is in permanent flux as people evaluate religious messages on the basis of changing social aspirations and changing perceptions of spiritual insecurity and need.

The valid point, however, is that while the religious field, like other social fields, is characterised by autonomy in that it operates on the basis of field-specific transformations and evaluations of capital, it also contributes to shaping economic inequalities. This is because people’s positions in hierarchically ordered social space *correspond* to their religious preferences and orientations as their cultural and religious habitus mediates social position and religiosity. Following Bourdieu (1977: 84), “the habitus, the durably installed generative principles of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle.” Class positions correspond with particular forms of perception, action, and cultural judgment or evaluation. I suggest that religion is central to how the cultural habitus operates in producing social and economic hierarchies in urban Africa (see also Katsaura, 2017).

This mediation between social space and religiosity, in turn, is made possible by the ways in which cultural styles and the tastes they express constitute a system of legible signs that (other) social actors recognise and attribute to locations in social space. In other words, people understand the social world including its hierarchies and orderings and other people’s positions in them via cultural markers *as signs* of position, membership, and social worth. As Koehrsen (2018: 1239–1240) has argued, “actors mark social class differences within the sphere of religion by employing specific religious tastes and styles. The religious style concerns the performative dimensions of religion and encompasses all the characteristics that are visible and potentially differentiating.”

Importantly, the signs of Pentecostalism – in particular those relating to religious salvation, economic success and cultural sophistication – are read in different ways by different social actors in urban South Africa. Among the poor, there is an ongoing fascination with the apparent wealth of particular Pentecostal pastors. This wealth is understood to articulate God’s blessings. For these groups, wealth as enabled by spiritual blessings translates into religious and cultural prestige. It is this prestige that explains why many people are attracted to “prosperity type” Pentecostal churches in spite of the high economic price they are expected to pay in exchange for the promise of salvation (van Wyk, 2014, 2015).

At the same time, among sections of the poor living in Cape Town’s townships, there has been an increasing discomfort and sometimes outright rejection of the new Pentecostal actors who engage in and perform very explicit financial transactions in their religious services. During my field research in May 2016, one of my informants

complained to me: “We pastors have a bad name now. People look down on us because of what all these mushroom pastors do.” Since around 2015, numerous reports have appeared in mass media and social media of Pentecostal pastors demanding strange and sometimes humiliating actions from their followers. Pretoria-based Pastor Lesego Daniel has asked followers to eat grass in order to be closer to God and drink gasoline to prove they were protected by the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> Rethebo Rabalago, South Africa’s so-called “Doom Pastor,” has asked people to let him spray an insecticide into their faces to heal them from AIDS and cancer.<sup>5</sup> Those among my informants in Khayelitsha who were especially critical of these practices attributed their rise to the influx of pastors from other countries – especially Nigeria and the Congo – and to the fact that, in their eyes, they were not real pastors but charlatans looking to make money via illicit and harmful means. Wealth is thus seen as either a blessing or witchcraft. Other churches, such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God from Brazil, have been criticised because of their excessive financial demands on followers. Significantly, pastors who have been most vocal in their criticisms have lost several members of their congregations to these churches over the years.

At the heart of Pentecostal pastors’ and poor township congregants’ conceptualisation of the link between religion and money is therefore not the spectacular promise of the prosperity gospel, but the idea that even small sacrifices (i.e. small tithes) are important in the path to salvation. However, in order to offer them, people have to generate income. Thus, one pastor from the Khayelitsha township in Cape Town explained to me in an interview:

My desire is when people are saved. That is why I hold meetings with the people that are not working so that they see they can do something for themselves. I wish to see them growing, understanding God, fearing God and also understanding the gifts they receive from God. Also they must be successful financially. They must start small businesses and then they can be successful.

Exhortations of this kind to engage in business and to become economically independent and successful are frequent in the Pentecostal pastors’ discourses. These discourses are in many ways animated by an ethic of self-mobilisation and people’s individual responsibility for self-improvement, sometimes articulated through psychologies of “positive thinking.” Another pastor described his work as follows:

Even if you grew up in a poor family, as you come to God, as you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior, Jesus will give you a new mind. And you will think positive. It’s not about your parents, it’s not about your ancestors, it’s about you, it’s about your mind. Now I plan new things for you, I speak positive words to you, you must change, you must do a business. That’s the kind of work I am doing.

At the same time, poor Pentecostals place maximum stress on physical appearance. Proper dress and good manners are construed as reflections of mental states and one’s readiness to work for oneself and for the glory of Jesus and ultimately, one’s salvation. One pastor suggested:

I think you must show humbleness. But people, they won’t pay [tithes] if I don’t wear a nice suit. That means you must be presentable. God likes to see you that way. And you show that



God likes you. Our God is rich. You must not wear clumsy things. Serving God does not mean I can be clumsy, not at all! You must show that God is above all. If you serve God you must be presentable. You must be clean, you must wear nice things.

While this quotation demonstrates how physical appearance is understood as a status marker (showing to others that one is liked by God) and as serving God's prestige, it also shows how it is the congregation's reading of the pastor's wealth via *his* physical appearance and clothes as signs of blessing that sets in motion an exchange economy. His appearance motivates congregants to offer tithes, which in turn contribute to his wealth, allowing him to further improve his appearance and develop his prestige. In addition to the magic economy in which economic success is seen as produced via sacrifices, there is thus a *prestige economy*, which relies on the ways in which (the pastor's) economic success is read as a sign of his religious status, increasing his prestige in a self-reinforcing fashion. The more prestigious a person is, the more she or he is able to put success "on display" and the more people are willing to become dependents of this person as they symbolically share in her or his prestige and hope to receive similar blessings that produce similar successes.

My informants from Khayelitsha's middle class, by contrast, did not comment on the rise of the prosperity gospel in the same way, chiefly because it seemed much less relevant to them. They felt that people followed "mushroom pastors" or "fake pastors" because they were uneducated, which undermined their ability to discern real miracles and false promises. Importantly, they tended to understand their own social position and economic success as both testifying to the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives *and* as an individual achievement wrought from hard work, education, and personal genius. Middle-class Pentecostals, both male and female, often engaged in collective prayers during meetings in everyday life in a family house, on the street, or at their workplace. In these prayers, they thanked Jesus for the blessings he had bestowed upon them, blessings whose signs were clearly visible to them and their families. For them, miracles were not so much radical changes to be asked for and demanded from Jesus, but changes that were already observable and present. For middle-class Pentecostals, their status of "being saved" was already validated through the social position they had acquired and occupied. Importantly, this was recognised by others. Therefore, the rise of middle-class Pentecostalism does not necessarily mean that Pentecostal practitioners are economically successful and upwardly mobile because of their discipline, but that Pentecostalism can be attractive to the middle classes because it is culturally malleable and develops a particular middle-class style, which manifests itself in incorporated religious middle-class tastes as Koehrsen (2018, 2019) found in his research in Argentina.

## Conclusions

There has been an increasing sociological interest in the links between two powerful global trends: the ongoing expansion of neoliberal capitalism and deepening social inequalities and regional disparities on the one hand, and the revitalisation of religious identities, practices and notions of belonging on the other. In this article, I have addressed a range of questions that arise from these links: how is religion related to individual

economic success and upward social mobility? How is economic success conceptualised in religious traditions such as Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity? How does religion feed into social inequalities and processes of social class formation?

Cultural sociological approaches that follow in the footsteps of Max Weber's theory of life conduct (*Lebensfuehrung*) and the ways in which inner-worldly asceticism has been instrumental in bringing about modernity, such as those of Peter Berger, suggest that religion continues to be a driving force of modernity in regions such as Africa and Latin America. In my view, this approach has two weaknesses: first, the suggested social mechanism whereby religious belief leads to individual success is both rarely realistic and overly rationalised; and second, it fails to take into account the ways in which religious ideologies are themselves always already embedded in structures of social inequality and processes of class formation.

I argue that Bourdieu's theory of distinction is particularly apt for theorising these mutual and dynamic relationships between religion and neoliberal capitalism and for exploring empirically how religious practices (such as sacrifices) and religious ideologies (such as the prosperity gospel) are products of economic structures which they rework and reinforce. Inspired by Bourdieu and based on ethnographic evidence from Cape Town, I suggest that what mediates the relationships between religions on the one hand and economic structures and orientations on the other are particular forms of cultural subject formation and practices of distinction. These practices of cultural distinction have two main effects: first, they operate as signs, which encode religious status and social positions and which actors in everyday life are able to decipher; and second, they set in motion a wider range of transactions, which I call the "prestige economy." In this prestige economy, the symbolic capital of individuals (in particular pastors and other "big men," or central figures in the social worlds of Pentecostalism) is constituted via its perception as an outcome of blessing. The prestige accrued from these conceptualisations and perceptions incites people to offer, or better, to invest, money in an effort to become successful by forcing their luck.

While it is clear that there are powerful resonances between neoliberalism and the rise of Pentecostalism, the Bourdieusian approach allows us to conceptualise with much greater precision people's differential and mutually related positioning towards, and engagements with, Pentecostalism. Specific interpretation of Pentecostalism corresponds to class background as people's position in the system of economic inequalities articulates their aspirations, desires, and assumptions about links between economic vulnerability and spiritual insecurity. The reworking of Pentecostal messages and tenets along these lines then produces cultural styles such as the Pentecostal "moderns" who tend to belong to the middle classes, and Pentecostal "traditionalists" who tend to belong to the urban poor. Such analytical differentiations are outcomes of practices of distinction people produce in their daily lives and which are based on and enable the accumulation of different types of social and cultural capital.

Importantly, the different types of Pentecostal habitus I have explored should not be seen as static reproductions of an existing social structure. The criticism issued by relatively poor pastors of the highly demanding financial sacrifices of self-aggrandising pastors I described, are a case in point. In addition, as Karen Lauterbach (2016) has astutely observed Pentecostal entrepreneurialism should be viewed as a field of both cultural

creativity and economic dynamism in which some pastors – at the expense of others – do achieve social upward mobility while simultaneously depending on social capital embodied in relations with seniors and patrons. I suggest therefore that one important avenue for future research into the dynamic nature of the prestige economies in urban Africa lies in a Bourdieusian approach that takes further inspiration from the sociology of critique. People's critique of existing social structures has the potential to disrupt the "cultural match" between neoliberalism and Pentecostalism.

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## Notes

1. The names of churches, pastors, and all other individuals mentioned in this article are pseudonyms used to protect their identities.
2. See <http://www.groundup.org.za/article/scuffles-bail-hearing-khayelitsha-pastor-accused-rape/> (accessed 28 November 2016).
3. See <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Local/City-Vision/Rape-victims-cry-out-for-justice-20150716> (accessed 28 November 2016).
4. <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/poor-people-will-do-anything-for-a-miracle-20170415> (accessed 22 March 2020).
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43002701> (accessed 22 March 2020).

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