PENTECOSTALISM BEYOND BELIEF: TRUST AND DEMOCRACY IN A MALAWIAN TOWNSHIP

Harri Englund

Pentecostal Christians in Malawi sometimes uncover the intricate plots that the Devil, also known as Lucifer Satan, has woven to ruin their Christian lives. Testimonies giving insights into Satanic schemes are not only delivered by former witches and Satanists in churches, but also publicized by private evangelical radio stations and the audio tapes, letters and tracts that circulate among Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals alike. Items that are not meant to be seen by Christians are potentially the most disturbing evidence of Satanic machinations. The following excerpts are from a letter, allegedly signed by Lucifer Satan and written in Chichewa, intercepted by Pentecostal pastors in Lilongwe in 1999.1

Rulers of Darkness and All Demons of All Kinds, Universal Spirit of Wickedness:

Attention please because true Christians are winning us day after day. If we are not careful, we shall fail completely...

Let them know that Jesus will come, but that there is plenty of time before he arrives. They shall think that only after ten or more years will Jesus come, whereas we know that the time has finished. You must know that Jesus does not lie like we do. Indeed Jesus is coming soon, and our end is nigh.

They shall waste time with useless things so that they will forget about meeting the Lord in Heaven. They shall not give testimonies nor preach the truth. Those who have a TV shall always be preoccupied with it instead of Bible study. When they want to pray, they shall doze and fall asleep in the middle of a prayer.

Make sure that there will be confusion in families. The husband shall not love his wife, and the wife shall not obey her husband, thereby they shall fail to be chosen.

If you have any problems at all call my home telephone, number 000 000 000 0. Say your name and I will answer you.

Warning:

Do not leave this letter in public where Christians could see it and our work would be useless. Remember our meetings every Saturday night in the General Assembly Headquarters.

1 Missives by the Devil have exercised Christians in other times and places (see, for example, Lewis 1942).
Agenda:

1. How can we defeat all pastors?
2. How can we cause disappointment among Christians?
3. Whom shall we send to disappoint Christians?
4. How can we infiltrate churches by our people?

If you have anything else to add, tell me quickly. Work hard night and day.

I am the father of lies.
Lucifer Satan

I obtained a copy of this letter from the leader of a small independent Pentecostal church in the high-density township of Chinsapo in Lilongwe. While he was clearly agitated by its contents, an argument about its veracity ensued when I produced the letter during a chance meeting in a private house in the same township. I was with five Pentecostal men, who represented between them three different independent churches. Two of the men were pastors, but they could not agree as to whether the letter deserved serious attention. One of the pastors announced that he was also in possession of this letter, and a lay member mentioned that he had recently heard about it on the radio. Their and my interest in the letter exasperated the other pastor. He accused us of false concreteness, of believing that the Devil wrote letters, lived in a house and had a telephone. He pressed us to tell him where the Devil's house was located. His colleague sneered at him and asked him to be honest (wachilungamo). I had learnt during my fieldwork that many township dwellers understood a windowless white building in the neighbouring low-density Area 3 to be the Devil-worshippers' headquarters. The contentious pastor ignored this common understanding and proceeded to ask his friends to call the number that was in the letter. Why not find out who answers? His colleague laughed at him in utter amazement: how could his friend even think of talking to the Devil! Unperturbed, the pastor explained that people wrote all kinds of sinister letters, including anonymous threats, and that by taking this letter at face value Christians failed to notice the actual methods that the Devil deployed. Crucial were demonic spirits (ziwanda) which operated at different levels of the Satanic hierarchy (see Englund 2004: 301). Every born-again fought with demonic spirits at the level appropriate to his or her spiritual maturity. Only people

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2 At least half of the township’s Pentecostal churches are independent, some of them recent offshoots of bigger churches and others long-established institutions brought by migrants (Englund 2003). Many congregations are small, comprising only a dozen adults, while the biggest congregations boast several hundreds of adherents. Following an initial fieldwork period of nine months in 1996–7, I continued research in the township through annual visits until 2006. Another extended stay took place in 2002–3.

3 The building is said to have been used by the Freemasons during the colonial era.
could write letters, live in houses and own telephones, not the demonic spirits, including Lucifer Satan, that tormented them.

More doubt unravelled the more I sought Pentecostals’ views on the letter. During the above-mentioned encounter, for example, one of the lay members pointed out that the letter mentioned the name of Jesus even though Satanists were not supposed to be able to utter it. When I relayed these comments to the pastor who had given me the copy of the letter, he asked with some irritation whether my interlocutors had denied that the things described in the letter were real. Was it not true that some people fell asleep while praying or reading the Bible, or that they busied themselves with everything else except Bible study? For this pastor, the interesting issue was whether these all too common problems were indeed consequences of Satanic machinations, not whether the letter itself emanated from the pen of Lucifer Satan.

BEYOND BELIEF

Even when analysis is spared the problematic notion of ‘fundamentalism’, academics and other observers rarely allow for much suspicion and doubt in the life-worlds of Pentecostal Christians. Arguments such as the one outlined above are, however, so common among Pentecostals in Chinsapo township that the tension between credulity and suspicion would seem to be at the core of their experience. They are not unlike other impoverished township dwellers in this regard, most of whom grapple with deceptive appearances and uncertain expectations on a daily basis. Livelihoods are precarious in Chinsapo, based on small-scale trading in second-hand clothes and other imported or smuggled goods, or on poorly paid and insecure employment as labourers and low-ranking civil servants. The vast majority of the township’s 30,000 residents are first-generation migrants from all parts of Malawi (Englund 2002), faced with the constant possibility that the strangers they encounter are tricksters bent on taking advantage of their gullibility.

Under these circumstances, distrust easily becomes the norm and trust the exception. Although Pentecostal Christians have at their disposal a particularly compelling set of perspectives on this condition, it would be wrong to see these perspectives as a function of a deeply held belief. A distinction, following Ruel (1997: 56–7), between believing in its weak and strong senses clarifies this point. Problems of belief in the weak sense are encountered everywhere, such as when the contentious pastor disputed his colleague’s belief in the authenticity of the Devil’s

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4 A notable exception is van Dijk’s (2001) account of young Pentecostals’ scepticism about witchcraft and political authority in Malawi before democratization. I prefer to describe Pentecostals’ arguments in terms of doubt and suspicion rather than scepticism. Whereas scepticism arises from hesitation over the reality of certain phenomena, people can doubt the veracity of particular claims about, for example, the Devil’s interventions while being convinced that the Devil exists. For a critique of the concept of fundamentalism in the study of Pentecostalism, see Martin 2002: 1.
letter. Difficulties arise when scholars frame their inquiry through the strong sense of belief, as though belief itself was what defines and determines Pentecostalism. Belief in the strong sense is what enables scholars to contrast Pentecostals with non-Pentecostals; it becomes ‘a way of setting people into cultural compartments’ (Ruel 1997: 58).

Ruel’s intent was to expose ‘the monumental peculiarity of Christian “belief”’ (1997: 36) and its adverse impact on the comparative study of religion. My objective is to suggest that this monumental peculiarity ought to be avoided in the study of Pentecostalism as it is refracted in Chinsapo township. Before Ruel, Smith (1977, 1979) had traced the changing semantics of ‘believing’ in Christian thought and practice. One of his main arguments was that the importance the concept of belief had assumed in Christianity was a relatively recent, post-Reformation development and, as such, not a necessary attribute of all forms of Christianity, let alone other religions. Taking the King James Authorized Version of the Bible from 1611 as an example, Smith (1977: 44–6) demonstrated that whereas the word ‘faith’ appeared there 233 times, ‘belief’ did so only once. The verb ‘to believe’ appeared more often, largely because English, unlike Hebrew and Greek, did not have a verb derived from ‘faith’. Smith’s central contention was that the connotations of believing came to change from commitment and trust to a propositional attitude that implied the possibility of error. In other words, Christians became self-conscious believers, no longer committed because they knew, rather than believed, that God existed. As Ruel (1997: 55) noted, Smith’s attempt to recover faith as the basic concept of all religions was both normative and peculiarly inattentive to the way in which faith and belief had become entwined in common usage (see also Asad 2001: 144–5). In this regard, ‘trust’ appears more felicitous than ‘faith’ as a description of the orientation that, for example, Pentecostalism in Chinsapo township appears to cultivate. It allows the analyst both to describe the specific spiritual sources of their trust and to explore the relationships that emanate from this orientation, subverting any attempt to represent Pentecostals as confined to an enclave of believers.

In the study of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Africa, an emphasis on elite evangelists and their upwardly mobile followers, pioneered by Gifford (1991, 1998, 2003), may explain why ‘belief’ has remained the centrepiece of academic analysis. Their social and religious lives appear conveniently circumscribed to warrant an exclusive focus on the form and content of their gospel. Middle-class Africans are also accessible to expatriate researchers in a way that impoverished Pentecostals are not. Worshipping in the mega-churches of urban centres, and drawing on the mass-mediated products of a transnational

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5 Chichewa speakers use the same verb, kukhulupirira, for ‘believing’ and ‘trusting’, and it is not immediately apparent why observers should choose one rather than the other as the translation of kukhulupirira. However, precisely because in English, as in many other languages, ‘to believe’ and ‘to trust’ can also share the same semantic field, analysis must extend from linguistics to ethnography.
religious movement, middle-class Pentecostals and Charismatics are often fluent in English, French or Portuguese, seemingly relieving expatriate researchers of the need to study the vernacular expressions of Pentecostalism. The consequences of this analytical approach are far-reaching. Not only does Pentecostal Christianity appear amenable to academic specialization, as though a universal ‘theology of the Spirit’ could accommodate differences of class and history (see, for example, Anderson 2004). An optical illusion, particularly in African Studies, may also have resulted from the disproportionate attention to the middle-class and their prosperity gospel. Studies of Pentecostalism in villages and urban slums reveal the intricate webs of relationships within which the majority of African Pentecostals live their lives, never quite able, or even willing, to confine their social and spiritual existence to the church (Englund 2004: 307; Jones 2005). These studies remind us that most Africans, Pentecostal or not, cannot afford to be autonomous individuals (Nyamnjoh 2004: 34–5). It is also increasingly recognized that surveys of churches and movements, while valuable in their own right, have to be complemented with detailed accounts of Christian lives in Africa (Engelke 2003: 84), a development prefigured by Sundkler’s (1948) pioneering work. While pursuing this challenge, scholars will do well to heed Meyer’s (2004a: 467) warning against adopting the notion of a deeply seated inner belief that would affirm a definition of religion as a separate sphere (see also Asad 1993, 2003).

The study of Pentecostalism, released from the confines within which the concept of belief tends to restrict it, can address issues of wider significance in Africa’s past and present, such as the emergence of trust and democracy. Yet although anthropologists have long advanced diverse arguments against ‘belief’ as an analytical category (see, for example, Gable 2002; Good 1994; Needham 1972; Pouillon 1982; West 2005), two extreme positions in current anthropology illustrate how difficult it is to account for the specificity of spiritual orientations without succumbing to this category. In his effort to spearhead the anthropology of Christianity as a new sub-discipline, Robbins (2007) argues that anthropologists have been too committed to the idea of continuity to recognize the temporal and social ruptures that Christianity entails. The tendency, according to Robbins, has been to represent Christianity as ‘inconsistently or lightly held or as merely a thin veneer overlying deeply meaningful traditional beliefs’ (2007: 6). Robbins’s critique is a laudable appeal to take seriously what anthropologists’ Christian

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6 The study of Pentecostalism in Latin America, from Martin’s (1990) pioneering work onwards, has been more attuned to questions of context and class. For a contribution to African Studies along these lines, see Maxwell 2006.

7 Compare, for example, the frequent and unreflexive use of ‘belief’ in Englund 2003, 2004. A critique of the category of belief is not, of course, incompatible with analysis of what Pentecostals themselves hold central to their religion, namely frequent prayers and Bible study (see Maxwell 2006: 184–211). It is also the case that important differences can be discerned in the approaches of political leaders and impoverished Pentecostal Christians in Africa to the resources that more affluent parts of the world appear to offer (Englund 2003).
interlocutors represent as their central values and practices. The specific characteristics of Pentecostalism in Chinsapo township, for example, do not reduce it to a sorry status of syncretism that would preclude comparison with other forms of Christianity elsewhere. At the same time, however, Robbins's reliance on a concept of Christian culture reproduces many of the problems with the concept of belief. To describe societies as though they were encompassed by a Christian culture is to effect precisely the kind of analytical compartmentalization that belief, as 'a badge of distinctiveness' (Ruel 1997: 59), has been seen to do. The concept of Christian culture seems unable to attend to the situated nature of Christianity and other religions, lived and pursued as they are within contexts in which social relationships are rarely confined to persons who share one's own religious outlook. As such, Robbins's commitment to culturalism prevents him from fully appreciating the distinction he makes between 'believing that' and 'believing in' (see Robbins 2007: 14–16). Whereas the former refers to a propositional attitude that makes belief seem a lesser form of knowledge, the latter, as Robbins correctly explains, entails trust and commitment, an act of engaging with the world. What the concept of an encompassing Christian culture is unlikely to discern, however, is the way in which this engagement with the world produces relationships and events that no cultural scheme can govern.

In this regard, more promising is Green's (2006) critique of recent perspectives on the interfaces between religion and politics in Africa. She points out that many Western observers, academic and otherwise, have long seen African politics and society as infused with religion and spirituality. The upshot has been to convey a view in which African social life is religiously determined, often pathologically so. If Green pursued this line of critique, her perspective would accord with the argument of this article that stresses the potential of religion to enhance and expand the scope of trust among impoverished Malawians. However, the effort to think across the domains of social analysis is undermined by Green's insistence on religious and spiritual orientations as secondary to what she considers to be a properly sociological explanation. While her approach includes an important reminder of the materiality of Christianity in Africa – ranging from the promise of healing to new economic opportunities – Green writes as if the anthropological critique of functionalism never happened (see, in particular, Sahlins 1976). An example of how materiality becomes severed from symbolic and spiritual dimensions is her comment that Africans' quest for literacy through mission education was 'often for the practical purpose of reading and writing rather than salvation' (Green 2006: 640). Such a statement appears to overlook the extent to which 'practical purposes' are informed by what people in their particular circumstances consider

8 It is worth pointing out that Robbins came to develop his ideas of radical and encompassing ruptures after studying Pentecostalism in Papua New Guinea among a population no larger than 390 individuals (see Robbins 2007: 11).
to be symbolically and morally compelling – no less in the contemporary Euro-American regimes of audit (Power 1997; Strathern 2000) than in the histories of literacy and Christianity in Africa (Peterson 2004).

There can be no easy reconciliation between the two positions proposed by Robbins and Green. However, instructive is the way both arguments are undermined by the problems that the concept of belief has maintained in the study of Christianity. Whereas Robbins’s concept of Christian culture assumes a distinct category of believers, Green is able to assert the primacy of sociological explanation by taking religious orientations as beliefs, more or less false rationalizations of material and institutional conditions. In order to avoid these problems with the concept of belief, the study of Pentecostalism in Africa must redouble its effort to defy compartmentalization. The ethnographic approach offers an opportunity to show how Pentecostals engage in practices that carry significance far beyond any specialized academic interest in their particular religious orientation. One such issue of wider significance is democracy. The ethnographer’s perspective on everyday practices can yield an understanding of how the Pentecostal emphasis on human imperfection generates trust through spiritual kinship. The ethnography of Pentecostalism can thereby question the distinction between generalized and particularized trust, especially as it is deployed by some political scientists to define illiberal religious orientations as the enemies of the generalized trust that supports democracy (see Uslander 1999). A similar distinction, as is discussed below, occasions laments over Africans’ investment in particularized social relationships and their consequent failure to trust anonymous bureaucracies (Berman 2004). An ethnographic perspective on trust and democracy, by contrast, shows how Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals occupy one world, their shared existential predicament creating conditions for an expansion of trust.

HUMAN IMPERFECTION

Human beings, Pentecostals in Chinsapo township would say, were not the crowning achievement of God’s creation. Sermons and everyday discourse often expound on the fallibility and deceit that human beings bring to the world. They are intrinsic to the human condition, the second birth their only solution. A popular song, composed by a female Pentecostal in Chinsapo, lists three body parts and the abuse to which people subject them (see opposite page).

While sermons often combine tragicomic stories of human imperfection with grim warnings against finding oneself in hell, this song is an example of the many humorous and witty observations through which Pentecostals in Chinsapo depict the human condition. The

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9 Green offers her argument partly as an auto-critique of her own work. This seems unnecessary, because the premise that ‘religion is not an explanatory system’ (Green 2003: 11) has enabled her to produce a subtle perspective on the ways in which Christianity became interwoven with kinship and gender relations in Tanzania (see Green 2003).
song captures the attention of its audience through its methodical consideration of body parts and its amusing use of the Chichewaized versions of the English words exhaust (*eksozi*), carrier (*kaliyala*) and suitcase (*sutikesi*). Yet the humour of the song would not be compelling without a sense of truth in its depiction of the human condition. The same conviction about human imperfection informs Pentecostal critiques of attempts to elevate human beings to the level of the divine, whether they are Pentecostal pastors or Catholic saints. Pastors and foreign evangelists need to convey humility and assert the distinction between their prayers and the actual origin of good works in the Holy Spirit. Catholics, on the other hand, are often accused of worshipping idols (*kupembedza mafano*), such as the Virgin Mary. Mary was a mere human being, a product of mundane conception, who gave birth to the son of God because of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals in Chinsapo condemn the worship of human beings and frequently find deplorable examples of this practice in their midst. Not only can pastors lose sight of their actual obligations, domestic relations can also make one spouse, usually the wife, obey the other as if the latter were more important than God. A typical instance is provided by those who allow their spouses’ criticism of frequent prayers and church attendance to affect their devotion to the born-again life.

Human imperfection is, in other words, intrinsic to the human condition that the second birth promises to transcend. It does so not by substituting one sense of inner life with another, but by expanding the self from the confines into which the first birth thrusts every person. Among Pentecostals in Chinsapo, this expansion of the self is achieved through relationships with others, some of which try the born-again’s commitment, while others provide a positive foundation for experiencing the new condition. The commitment is, as in all Protestant Christianity, experienced and expressed as a commitment to Jesus as one’s saviour. Pentecostals in Chinsapo are clear, however, that this commitment – and its eschatological orientation towards the end time – can emerge and be sustained only under this-worldly circumstances. During a sermon, one pastor in an independent church
gave an ingeniously concrete idea of what was at stake. He presented his collection of Russian dolls, seven identical wooden figures of different sizes whose hollow inside made it possible for bigger ones to encompass smaller ones. The pastor explained that each doll represented a particular temptation, and with each temptation, if successfully overcome, the person would progressively grow in the Spirit (*kukula mwa Uzimu*). The last two temptations, corresponding to the two biggest dolls, were beer drinking and adultery. The pastor’s device combined the understanding that the second birth is a gradual process, despite often dramatic early experiences of change (*kutembenuka*, ‘to turn over or around’), with the insight that it is in the practical engagement with the world that this growth takes place. Jesus is the object of one’s commitment, but the commitment only becomes apparent in social relationships.

As such, commitment to Jesus is not abstracted from the practical circumstances of its emergence and continuation. For Pentecostals in Chinsapo, those circumstances include the presence of a whole range of persons who do not share their particular spiritual outlook. As the largest residential area in the capital, Chinsapo hosts virtually all the Christian denominations found in Malawi, along with Islam, the *gule wamkulu* (*nyau*) secret society and numerous healing practices. The congested infrastructure and the general lack of amenities make encounters between strangers inevitable, provoke conflict and, at the same time, give rise to creative partnerships, whether in churches or in the petty businesses that provide the majority with a living. Few pastors and other Pentecostal officials can sustain themselves materially through their churches, and, as is discussed below, material and spiritual aspirations often coincide; prospective church members are found in the everyday contexts of township life. While poverty breeds enough misfortune and misdemeanour to prove that this is indeed the end time (*nthawi yomaliza*), the success of independent pastors as Pentecostal leaders often depends on considerable forbearance. What would be condemned as backsliding (*kubwerera*, ‘to return’) by elite evangelists often elicits an acknowledgement that the growth of a born-again can only be gradual.

**THE PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES OF PENTECOSTALISM**

Pentecostals in Chinsapo are often remarkably cavalier about church membership, welcoming visitors to their congregations and changing their own allegiance without obvious doctrinal reasons. Congregational boundaries are jealously policed by some pastors, who, especially when they are independents, face considerable challenges in restraining their flocks from straying into the pastures of more advantaged churches.10

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10 The most prominent Pentecostal church in Chinsapo is the Assemblies of God. When its imposing building was erected in the 1990s, it brought electricity to its neighbourhood in the township.
Yet pastors and lay members alike stress the unity of the born-again condition. Rather than depicting commitment to Jesus as each individual’s private decision, they take Jesus as the source of their relationships with one another. Idioms of embodiment abound, such as in the statement, ‘We are in one body with Jesus Christ’ (tili m’thupi limodzi ndi Yesu Khristu). Disputes over church membership arise from these relationships, and Pentecostals are reluctant to compare the characteristics of different Pentecostal churches in abstract terms. For example, when I reported what some academics at the University of Malawi had told me about the difference between Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, persons who had changed their membership from one to the other refused to accept that they had crossed a theological boundary. ‘Don’t let them fool you’ (asakunamizeni) was a comment on academics’ typologies of churches and movements.

The lack of interest in abstract doctrines accords with the primacy that the second birth assumes over formal baptism and Bible study. Baptism through total immersion in water usually follows the person’s experience of becoming born-again, although some pastors feel the pressure to arrange baptisms for newcomers even before this experience. Becoming a born-again is often a memorable moment, spoken of as ‘receiving Jesus’ (kulandira Yesu) or as ‘being born anew’ (kubadwa mwatsopano). Pastors and other established church members are important conduits and witnesses of the moment, its tearful testimonies culminating in an expression of commitment to Jesus. One of their hands raised and their eyes closed, the new born-again swear commitment to Jesus under the more senior Pentecostals’ supervision. As mentioned, however, no one takes the new condition for granted, and for some time afterwards the person is asked regularly how the experience has changed her or his life. The extent to which backsliding occasions comment or excommunication, and indeed whether it is socially recognized as backsliding, varies according to the situation of the relationships that constitute the particular born-again subject. What is recognized as a general principle is the insufficiency of Bible study in securing salvation. While virtually every Pentecostal congregation in Chinsapo has a Sunday School for Bible study, and while reading the Bible is expected to be every born-again’s favourite pastime, Pentecostals in Chinsapo make a distinction between Godly wisdom (nzeru ya Mulungu) and worldly wisdom (nzeru ya dziko lapansi). Even pastors and foreign evangelists with academic degrees in theology can be experts in mere worldly wisdom, if their conduct does not indicate that they know the power of God (mphamvu ya Mulungu). Jesus provides inspiration for Chinsapo’s poor and relatively uneducated Pentecostals in a double sense. Not only was he born in a cattle kraal (khola la ng’ombe), a sign of poverty with which Chinsapo’s Pentecostals can identify. They also point out that Jesus was not educated through formal schooling. He was a teacher (mphunzitsi) in Godly wisdom.

Different Pentecostal churches in Chinsapo place different demands on their pastors to accomplish studies in Bible colleges. For many lay members, however, a pastor’s academic credentials pale in comparison
with his or her capacity to mediate between God and the congregation. In contrast to what accounts of Charismatic high-flyers make their readers expect (see, for example, Gifford 2003), security rather than prosperity is the main preoccupation among Pentecostals in Chinsapo (see Englund 2001, 2003, 2004). It is the security provided by the name of Jesus against misfortune, hunger and disease that attracts newcomers, many of whom have previously sought security through the medicines of healers (asing’anga), categorically condemned once the second birth has taken place. Assistance in funerals is another important indicator of whether one’s pastor and brothers- and sisters-in-Christ are true Christians. Most funerals in Chinsapo are expected to proceed to the deceased’s village of origin, but a vigil is often arranged at the deceased’s house before moving to the village. Vigils require food and firewood; village funerals require vehicles to transport the corpse and the bereaved. While every Christian church is expected to support the bereaved, even a poor and small Pentecostal congregation can attract newcomers precisely because its intimacy is felt to guarantee security during life crises. Moreover, church boundaries are again permeable when the bereaved need to look for a pastor to bless the funeral in the village. If they are unable to accompany the bereaved to the village, Pentecostal pastors in Chinsapo write a letter to request the nearest Pentecostal congregation, regardless of its denomination, to conduct the burial.

FROM BELIEF TO TRUST

Social and political theory conventionally defines trust in relation to risk (see Gambetta 1988), as a ‘rational gamble’ (Uslander 1999: 123). Trust becomes, in this perspective, a distinctively modern phenomenon, inseparable from the emergence of individuality (see Seligman 1997). With the proliferation of choice and freedom comes a heightened sense of social complexity, making it necessary to substitute generalized trust for the particularized trust of close-knit groups. Building on this Eurocentric sociology of modernity (see Giddens 1990), critics have lamented Africans’ lack of trust in the ‘probity and competence’ of anonymous others (Berman 2004: 41). It is a part of the lament to point out how the ‘rhizomes of ethnic factionalism and patron–client politics’ render even the expectations of civil society ‘unrealistic’ (Berman 2004: 51). What a perspective based on the premise of lack and absence misses are, of course, the actual sources of civility and trust in contemporary Africa. In contrast to the concept of belief that sets Pentecostals apart from the rest of their social world, the concept of trust, once modified by ethnographic observation, situates them at the epicentre of popular engagements with civility and accountability.

11 Historians and anthropologists have demonstrated that ethnicity can be a basis upon which inter-ethnic civility and trust are erected in Africa (see Lonsdale 2004; Werbner 2004).
The alternative concept of trust emerges in relation to danger rather than risk.\(^\text{12}\) Pentecostals do not calculate risks as individuals disengaged from the relationships that bring them both misfortunes and protection. They seek to trust their brothers- and sisters-in-Christ as conduits of protection against the existential dangers of a world plagued by Satanic machinations. Trust is a quality of relationship that must inform not only a pastor’s perception of his or her congregation but also the congregation’s opinion of its pastor and other leaders. A single mother living in a shack in Chinsapo told me how she had decided to change her membership from one small independent Pentecostal church to another after the pastor and other officials in the first church had neglected her during crises. She lost two young children in rapid succession, and members of her future church came to sing hymns at the first funeral. She had a friend in this church, whom she had sometimes accompanied to Sunday services. The pastor in her own church, however, asked the visiting Pentecostals to be quiet so that he could conduct the funeral. When the second child died, the pastor came late to her shack and found that the deceased child had already been blessed by the pastor from the other church. The bereaved woman had no doubt where she would find compassion (chisoni) and assistance (chithandizo) during crises. The pastor in her new church saw her starting to attend his services every week.

Prospective church members who have not yet been born again test pastors’ trust, just as pastors themselves need to be trusted. Trust is both the cause and effect of the shared commitment to Jesus that makes persons recognize each other as related in spiritual kinship. Yet precisely because no Pentecostal in Chinsapo is able to insulate him- or herself from non-Pentecostal kin, neighbours, business partners and co-workers, backsliding and its associated dangers are a constant possibility. Consider a Chinsapo couple’s rather precarious involvement with Pentecostalism. They were a young couple with one child in 1999; she was a passive Presbyterian, he a lapsed Muslim. The wife, a newcomer to the city like her husband, became concerned about the lack of spiritual and material assistance they would face in the event of a funeral in their house. The husband spent his days roaming the streets of Lilongwe as a hawker and often indulged in drinking beer in the evenings and at weekends. Without a commercial venture of her own, she was confined to her neighbourhood in the township. While fetching water from the local borehole she got acquainted with a woman who belonged to a small independent Pentecostal church. This woman asked her to join her one Sunday for prayers. The wife enjoyed the singing, dancing and general conviviality of the congregation, but her husband scolded her afterwards. Suspicious of Pentecostals’ condemnation of the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, he ordered her to choose between family and church.

\(^\text{12}\) By contrast, the thinly veiled evolutionism advanced by the sociology of modernity would associate danger with the pre-modern ethos of familiarity (see Warren 1999: 322–4).
The pastor, who had noticed the absence of this prospective member, decided to find out where she lived. After several days of searching, he found to his surprise that the couple's house was situated along the same path where he lived himself. The wife told him about the ultimatum her husband had given, and the pastor advised her against divorce. He suggested, however, that she tell the husband that he would return to have a private meeting with him. Fearing confrontation and armed with the Bible, the pastor found the husband absent the evening he had given as the date of their meeting. After some waiting, the husband did arrive and allowed the pastor to enter the house. 'We did not even open the Bible!' (sitinatsegule Baibulo!), the pastor exclaimed when he described their first encounter to me. The two men, both of whom made their living as hawkers, had entered a lively discussion about business in which each found the other an interesting source of information. On the following Sunday, without having asked the man to join the church, the pastor saw the couple coming together to his service. Not only did the pastor have his congregation, most of whom sat on the floor, welcome the couple with tumultuous applause, but he also asked the husband to sit on a chair in the front with him. A few days later the husband asked the pastor if he had already included the wife’s name in the membership list. If so, he said, the pastor should also add the husband’s name.

The couple's formal entry into the church was by no means an event that made them fully-fledged Pentecostals. The pastor told me that he had to tolerate smoking and other dubious practices for a long time before church members such as this couple actually experienced the second birth in the Holy Spirit. The husband made an effort to give up drinking, at best for a whole week, but gradually grew lax in his church attendance, as did his wife. The couple had ceased to be recognized as church members two years after the initial entry, but their two years in the church had much in common with the lives of those lay members who stayed within the realm of Pentecostalism while shifting their loyalties between churches and pastors. Deeply felt experiences of protection and success, spoken of as 'breakthroughs' in English, alternate with moments of disillusion and distraction, their causes often traced to the Devil by both lay members and pastors. The existential dangers of misfortune and untimely deaths are common to Chinsapo's impoverished population. It is their particular spiritual orientation that provides the township's Pentecostals with a basis for generalized trust, one that expands civility across the various social boundaries of a multi-ethnic township.

TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Scholars who have seen in Pentecostalism potential for democratic culture have emphasized its adherents' exposure to new modes of
organization and leadership (see, for example, Englund 2000; Marshall 1993; Martin 1990; and the discussion in Robbins 2004: 134–6). New skills become necessary when a relatively uneducated Pentecostal assumes a position of responsibility in the congregation, with literacy and public speaking required of those who perform pastoral duties, and numeracy of those who look after the congregation’s accounts. While the overwhelming majority of pastors are men, women find opportunities to reform their husbands, even if incompletely as in the case above, and engage in organizing and running their own groups within congregations. This favourable view does not necessarily anticipate a direct link between personal transformation and the wider secular political culture, but interesting is its acknowledgement of alternatives even under distinctively undemocratic economic and political conditions. Alternatives are in demand in Malawi, where the expectations for democracy after three decades of authoritarian rule were fulfilled to a very limited extent during the decade of President Bakili Muluzi’s regime between 1994 and 2004 (Englund 2006). Politicians appeared to shift allegiances with scant regard for their constituents’ preferences, coming very close to granting Muluzi an unconstitutional third term in office, at the same time as the country’s economy plunged ever deeper into inequities and food shortages (see Dorwald and Kydd 2004). Pentecostal congregations among marginalized Malawians such as Chinsapo residents appeared, under these circumstances, as rare arenas of civility and accountability.

It would be a mistake, however, to model Chinsapo Pentecostals’ senses of accountability on those neo-liberal interventions that have served to hide deepening inequalities behind the mask of supposedly transparent bureaucracies and political representation (see Sanders and West 2003). Although accountabilities can be conceived of in the plural (Kelsall 2003), what is distinctive about the trust that Pentecostalism fosters in Chinsapo is its divergence from the abstraction and anonymity that are said to have secured successful bureaucracies in Euro-American history (see Berman 2004). Indeed, the importance of trust that undermines abstraction becomes clear when Pentecostals’ unease with neo-liberal accountability is considered. National elections, for example, did not unite Chinsapo’s Pentecostals, despite widespread resentment towards Muluzi’s Muslim identity and his alleged desire to Islamize Malawi (Englund 2006: 190–1). While many Pentecostals in Chinsapo were open about their vote for the opposition in both the 1999 and 2004 elections, others, moved by their personal experiences of harassment under authoritarian rule, supported the new government. Yet others declined to vote at all, convinced that born-again Christians should not participate in such divisive acts. If the candidate lost, they pointed out to me, disappointment at the outcome could upset a Pentecostal voter so much that it would impede the work of the Holy Spirit (Englund 2000: 600).

The accountability many congregations have adopted from the mainstream political culture also lays bare the limits of neo-liberal accountability in creating trust. Pentecostal churches in Chinsapo,
however small, have committees responsible for, among other things, the general management of the church and youth and women's affairs. Officials are elected to serve on these committees for a year or two, but it is striking that, especially in small congregations, members often stay at home when they know elections are to take place in the church. Fear (mantha) is the reason lay members quote to explain their behaviour, not because intimidation is common but because they are afraid of supporting a candidate who turns out to have been sent by the Devil to sow confusion. This fear indicates that trust has to be generated by other means than through electoral formalities. Yet pastors, anxious to avoid the impression that they alone choose officials, attempt to make the elections as confidential as possible. Even so, officials are often nominated or elected in their absence, a practice that leaves the pastor and his closest aides with the ultimate power to choose.

The same anxiety among pastors and officials makes them devise ways of accounting for the money they collect from the congregation as tithes and other contributions. Funds sent by benefactors elsewhere also need to be accounted for. A lack of accountability about the use of money is a common reason for splits within congregations and the disgrace that befalls some pastors. I have witnessed pastors ordering their treasurers (asungichuma) to read out receipts for their expenditure during Sunday services. Congregations, glassy-eyed and dumb, have listened to the tortuous readings of receipts that may have little connection to the money they had given, some receipts several years old.

As these examples illustrate, the procedures of accountability adopted from the mainstream political culture may not be the most consequential sources of trust and democracy in the lives of Chinsapo's Pentecostals. It is by giving each other actual opportunities to preach and pray that persons demonstrate how far they have reached in their spiritual maturity. In other words, trust hinges on an engagement with relationships rather than on following abstract procedures. The pastors of small and impoverished congregations are often inclined to give newcomers flattering titles, such as 'church elder' (mkulu wampingo), even if the person is yet to experience the second birth. Church elders, most of whom are men in their twenties and thirties, perform a range of tasks, from committee work to leading prayers upon the pastor's request at meetings and during Sunday services. Pastors have told me privately that they have few illusions about these newcomers' discovery of Jesus. Rather than reducing them to children needing explicit guidance and discipline, however, pastors seek to give them respect (ulemu). It is partly an instrumental gesture to keep them in the congregation, but at the same time it gives wavering newcomers an opportunity to discover Jesus in the very practice of congregational life. By being trusted lay members can develop their trust in Jesus as the saviour.

The frequent prayer and choir meetings during the week play an important role in preparing lay members for their public duties. Weekly late-evening prayer sessions give an opportunity to experiment with preaching before taking on the task during Sunday services or in the so-called crusades Pentecostal congregations launch in various public
spaces of the township and the city. Successful pastors also recognize the importance of encouraging women to speak out in the congregation. Pastors visit the weekly meetings of women’s groups, ostensibly to teach them the Word of God, but also to monitor their spiritual growth in order to identify those who should be asked to conduct prayers or explain passages from the Bible in bigger events. Conversely, spiritual growth takes place if a woman is trusted enough to have such opportunities.

Successful pastors whose churches have few material accoutrements to offer are constantly obliged to tread the thin line between condemnation and forbearance. Many lay members have an interest to learn and often subject their pastors to interrogations about apparent inconsistencies between the Word and Christian practice, typically with reference to the mention of wine consumption in the Bible. For their part, pastors spend much of their time encouraging (kulimbikitsa) those who have been absent from meetings and Sunday services or who have otherwise attracted criticism for their un-Christian conduct. Excommunications do happen, but pastors who do not base their judgement on popular opinion within the congregation in turn risk losing more followers. Under these circumstances, a successful pastor is one who, as in the example presented above, allows church members some latitude to set the agenda in their conversations. Moreover, not only tithes but all gifts and offerings that pastors receive, especially if their prayers appear to heal afflictions, need to be represented as gifts to God. Pastors and foreign evangelists mistake their role of leadership for patrimonialism at their own peril (see Englund 2001). No-one else but Jesus should receive praise for making spiritual kinship possible.

The effect of these subtle practices of trust is to tie persons together through obligations and expectations. Even if this effect is never complete, suspicion finding its way to unsettle emerging convictions, trust emerges in other spheres of life as much as within the church itself. Pentecostals can enter, for example, into business partnerships as an aspect of their overall commitment to each other through Jesus. Entire congregations in Chinsapo have become signatories to micro-credit schemes that stipulate collective responsibility for paying them back. Business partnership can also precede the shared discovery of Jesus. Even before they have formalized their partnership by, for example, taking a joint loan, small-scale traders need to cooperate in order to share information and to have someone to look after one’s merchandise when unexpected situations arise. The social scale of the city where they pursue their precarious livelihoods ensures the presence of strangers among both customers and rivals, however much all strive for a sense of security by cultivating particular connections (see Englund 2006: 185–90). Whereas many entrepreneurs rely on relatives and ethnic or regional compatriots for cooperation, Pentecostals are often inclined to seek rapport with strangers. Although no Pentecostal misses an opportunity to proselytize, success in everyday encounters depends on a similar appreciation of circumstance and timing as was noted above for pastors’ relationships with their flock. When with strangers in the context of business rather than crusades, most Pentecostals
understand that they must not frighten (*kuchititsa mantha*) strangers by launching into evangelism before some trust has been established by more mundane means. Trust achieved in one domain of life can give rise to a shared commitment to Jesus as the source of generalized trust.

**CONCLUSION**

The world of Pentecostalism in Chinsapo township is a world in which Pentecostals have frequent and extensive contact with non-Pentecostals. It is, in effect, one world, its shared conditions a constant source of discord. It is, moreover, a world in which Pentecostal zeal fuels the general existential tension between credulity and suspicion. Pentecostals are not linked to their non-Pentecostal kin and neighbours only as the righteous are linked to the sinful. The distinction is as much within as without, unsteady steps towards salvation backtracked when experience fails to corroborate the promise of the second birth. Like the existential dangers it enables township dwellers to articulate, Pentecostalism is never confined to churches and congregations. It occupies the public sphere as a possibility, perhaps increasingly so through intense proselytizing, mushrooming churches and cognate themes in popular culture (see also Meyer 2004b). Its public presence is inseparable from its personal appeal, but it would be futile to attempt a dissection of how much Pentecostal preoccupations have transformed, for example, Malawians’ spiritual and material orientations in general. At any rate, the tension between credulity and suspicion informed Malawian popular culture well before Pentecostalism assumed its current public presence. The figure of the witch has been a potent source of this tension, not least because popular doubt has long surrounded healers, whose expertise in anti-witchcraft medicine has suggested that they are witches themselves (Englund 2007: 301). Pentecostalism has introduced into this old predicament a compelling perspective on human imperfection.

An ethnographic encounter with Pentecostalism in Chinsapo township calls into question the consequences that ‘belief’ as an analytical category can have. The concept of belief, as mentioned, too often becomes ‘a way of setting people into cultural compartments’ (Ruel 1997: 58), one kind of believer contrasted with another kind just as social scientists are accustomed to comparing one society with another. The import of describing Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals as occupants of one world is precisely to substitute parts and wholes with relationships (see Strathern 1992). Although commitment to Jesus is achieved in and through social relationships, it is not a commitment to a social whole, if only because church membership fluctuates and in any case the Devil all too often succeeds in infiltrating the community of the saved. It is because suspicion, doubt and distrust define the shared existential predicament in Chinsapo township that the trust Pentecostalism generates is very different from what ‘disinterested professionals’ (Berman 2004: 53) are called upon to provide against Africa’s ills. Anonymity is undermined by specificity, abstraction by situational considerations, disinterested individuals by engaged brothers- and sisters-in-Christ.
What Africans have can be more consequential for democracy than what they lack, especially when a facile distinction between generalized and particularized trust gives way to an appreciation of the processes by which trust relations expand from particular spiritual orientations. Yet some observers are likely to find this conclusion rather implausible from the liberal point of view that sees abstract humanity – a condition that precedes all distinctions based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on – as the foundation of democracy. Its more recent multiculturalist version similarly seeks tolerance for differences on the basis of shared membership. According to these perspectives, Pentecostals cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be accommodated within liberal theories of democracy. To be sure, Pentecostals in Malawi as elsewhere seldom come across as the bastions of unqualified tolerance. Roman Catholics, Muslims and ‘pagan customs’ (miyanbo yachikunja) are the typical targets of their crusading condemnation. Some Pentecostals in Chinsapo township have even been involved in angry mobs attacking the Chewa secret society gule wamkulu (nyau). Pentecostalism and liberal democracy appear less disparate, however, if the emphasis on membership is examined a little further. The current theories of liberal multiculturalism have drawn attention to citizenship as the source of membership, but the implicitly exclusionary dimension of liberal democracy exercised theorists long before multiculturalism assumed its political and theoretical salience (see, for example, Mouffe 1998). The ‘demos’ in democracy is, more often than not, a function of membership rather than abstract humanity as liberal individualism would suggest. In other words, whereas a democracy of humankind is an abstraction, actually existing democracies necessarily entail a distinction between those who belong and those who are excluded. As such, lest this insight becomes an alibi to entertain totalitarian alternatives to liberalism, the actual sources of democratic membership need to be identified. Pentecostals in Chinsapo township offer a perspective, however counter-intuitive, into a process by which some of the striking inequalities and exclusionary practices in their world are defused by a spiritual and practical orientation. It is an orientation that seeks to transcend exclusion based on gender, race, ethnicity, language, regional origin, wealth – all highly potent instruments of exclusion in a township of mutual strangers with diverse social and ethnic backgrounds and, more broadly, in a country beset by a history of entrenched inequalities. Exclusion expressed in religious and spiritual terms appears here as an inevitable precondition for trust to emerge, but membership is never a straightforward consequence of a right identity. Democratic potential

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13 The question of whether political liberalism is blind to difference has attracted an enormous amount of reflection and analysis. An introduction to the historical and contemporary issues can be gained through Skinner 1998 and Kymlicka 1995.

14 The few Pentecostals who participated in communal violence were sharply criticized by their Pentecostal peers (see Englund 2007: 304–5).
arises less from Pentecostals’ adoption of accountable procedures in the running of their own affairs than from the very indeterminacy of a membership that needs to be constantly reaffirmed through practical engagement.

Many critics have, with varying degrees of despair, insisted that the proliferation of religious and spiritual movements in contemporary Africa has led to dubious explanations of its political and economic problems. Commenting on popular Nigerian discourses on corruption, Smith argues that Pentecostal Christians’ propensity to attribute Satanic machinations to corruption reconfigures ‘political issues as morality tales’ (2007: 215). It deflects, he adds, ‘attention from the larger political structures that are most directly culpable in producing and reproducing social inequality’ (Smith 2007: 219). At the end of his survey of Christianity’s public role in contemporary Africa, Gifford similarly felt that ‘any transformation possible through purely personal effort must be extremely limited’ (1998: 348). What Africa needs, therefore, is not so much Pentecostalism as ‘something structural, and something immediate’ (Gifford 1998: 348). Popular discourses on witchcraft and the occult, Green concurs, ‘turn people’s gaze inwards to their own community rather than outwards to the content of policy processes which produce poverty and vulnerability’ (2005: 260).

While developing this necessary critique of Pentecostalism and popular discourses on the occult in contemporary Africa, critics would do well, as Green (2006) has done elsewhere, to avoid the assumption that African social life, that of Pentecostals included, is determined by such religious and spiritual discourses. The problem is not a lack of awareness of policy among Malawi’s impoverished majority. Many of them are familiar with and, as described above, to some extent seek to emulate the procedures of accountability that new policies have supposedly introduced. Here they are remarkably loyal to the widespread tendency in actually existing liberal democracies to identify policy with procedural niceties rather than with tangible outcomes (see Paley 2004). As such, fresh insights into Africa’s problems may have to wait until critics recognize that neither Pentecostalism nor policy provides a panacea. In the meantime, Pentecostals in Chinsapo township will continue to attend to their precarious achievement of trust, not as an inward-looking community, still less as individuals celebrating their personal exploits, but as persons enmeshed in relationships that defuse some of the circumstances that produce exclusion. If their critics want to understand this way of engaging with the world, it seems advisable that they no longer consider Pentecostals as believers.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of belief, when applied in its strong sense, assumes an inner state that sets believers apart from non-believers. This article suggests that a concept of trust is more appropriate for the study of the religious orientation among Pentecostal Christians in Chinsapo, an impoverished township in Malawi’s capital city. Trust is a critical issue because even fellow members of Pentecostal congregations can turn out to have been sent by the Devil. Pastors also have to exercise considerable forbearance in order to encourage spiritual growth among backsliders. The boundaries of Pentecostal congregations are often permeable, with little emphasis on doctrinal differences. Pentecostal Christians also have frequent contact with kin, neighbours, customers and co-workers who do not share their religious orientation. Rather than being a matter of calculating risks, trust emerges in relation to the existential dangers of misfortune, hunger and disease that affect the lives of all township dwellers. Everyday contexts of township life are as important as proselytizing in generating trust between Pentecostals and those who are yet to experience the second birth in the Holy Spirit. In contrast to views that lament Africans’ particularized trust relations as an obstacle to democracy, this article suggests that generalized trust can emerge from a particular religious orientation. The article draws attention to the actual sources of civility and trust in contemporary Africa.
RÉSUMÉ

Le concept de croyance, dans son sens le plus fort, suppose un état intérieur qui différencie les croyants des non-croyants. Cet article suggère qu’un concept de confiance est plus adapté à l’étude de l’orientation religieuse chez les chrétiens pentecôtistes de Chinsapo, cité défavorisée de la capitale du Malawi. La confiance est un point critique car même au sein des congrégations pentecôtistes, tout membre peut être l’envoyé du diable. Les pasteurs doivent aussi faire preuve d’une grande indulgence pour encourager l’épanouissement spirituel des moins fervents. Les limites des congrégations pentecôtistes sont souvent perméables, et peu regardantes sur les différences doctrinaires. Les chrétiens pentecôtistes ont également des contacts fréquents avec des membres de leur famille, voisins, clients et collègues qui ne partagent pas leur orientation religieuse. Plutôt qu’une question de calcul de risque, la confiance naît par rapport aux dangers existentiels de malchance, de faim et de maladie qui touchent l’existence des habitants de la cité. Les contextes quotidiens de la vie dans la cité sont aussi importants que le prosélytisme pour créer de la confiance entre les Pentecôtistes et ceux qui n’ont pas encore vécu leur seconde naissance par le Saint Esprit. Contrairement aux opinions qui déplorent que les rapports de confiance particularisés des Africains soient un obstacle à la démocratie, cet article suggère que la confiance généralisée peut naître d’une orientation religieuse particulière. L’article attire l’attention sur les sources réelles de civilité et de confiance en Afrique contemporaine.