In the last one or two decades, the anthropology of religion has reassessed the old Weberian question about the link between Christianity and Modernity, in particular the relevance of missionary and non-missionary forms of Christianity in processes of inclusion in global capitalism, its consequence on local imaginaries of modernity and on the formation of selves (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Comaroff 1991, 1993; Donham 1999; Meyer 1998b; van der Veer 1995). Because of its increasing global relevance, in particular in those regions and among those people traditionally studied by anthropologists, Pentecostalism has become one of the fields within which these issues have been discussed intensively. I want to take up the questions of identity, modernism and Pentecostalism and discuss them in light of my empirical case: Ghanaian Neo-Pentecostalists in Berlin. In this context I will present religious means dealing with a migration related status paradox resulting from multiple and simultaneous incorporation in different nation states.

In the field of migration studies, religion is often described as a means for migrants to deal with the traumatic experiences of loss and instability in the receiving society. Ghanaians appeared to me at the beginning of my research to fit this image very well. In fact, churches turned out to be the most relevant migrants’ organisation. In Berlin, where official about 2000 Ghanaians live, I found 12 churches dominated and for the most part also founded by Ghanaian migrants. The majority of these churches were Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal. Some of them, obviously, offered religious and social protection against marginalisation experiences. These
relatively small congregations were occupied primarily with spiritual warfare against evil. This discourse appeared plausible to me because it reflected in my opinion the precarious situation of the migrants, who were threatened by harmful and invisible forces trying to control their lives, among them restrictive migration institutions, the invisible hand of the labour market and the expectations of their extended families in Ghana. But to my surprise, I also found another type of congregation. These Neopentecostal, or how they called themselves, charismatic churches shared with the Pentecostal churches their emphasis on a literal interpretation of the Bible, a strong anti-syncretic and anti-traditionalist discourse, a high relevance of signs and wonders and of ecstatic prayer. But the Neopentecostalists were much more modernistic in their self-presentation. This included playing mostly American religious pop songs, an affirmative attitude towards consumer capitalism, English as the main language of the service and the highlighting of the global and non-particularistic dimension of Christianity. The most astonishing aspect for me was that the main emphasis was not on protection against witchcraft or satanic forces but that a very positive and optimistic image of the world was created. Religious practices were described as a means to achieve wealth and success in life. It appeared almost unavoidable that the Charismatic Christian, as a heroic agent, would by “victorious” in the end. To illustrate this point I present a short example from a prayer meeting I attended in 2002:

Henry, one of the church elders, dressed in an elegant suit walks to the front of the stage and takes the microphone from the stand. He introduces the next prayer sequence with a loud and firm voice amplified by a stereo system: “As a Christian the miracles chase you and it is not you chasing the miracles. You become a conqueror. Say to yourself: ‘I am a conqueror, I am a successful man, I am a successful woman.’ Don't give up, prosperity will come. Your prosperity, your anointing, your joy in God will come. If you see the enemy, you can overcome him, don't be afraid. And if the prayer was not successful
yesterday, say, ‘today is my day, tomorrow is my day, next week is my day.’ Don't give up. Open your mouth and say, "I am a conqueror, I will succeed, it is my victory".

Listening to this and many similar messages, I wondered how it is possible that Ghanaian migrants could claim to be conquerors instead of victims. In this respect, it is important to understand that the promise of success and prosperity within the Charismatic discourse has two directions. On the one hand, it is a statement directed towards a desired future, but, on the other hand, it is also a statement about the present. **If God blesses the true believers in this world it is also true the other way around, being a true believer means being blessed.** In order to stress and to communicate the presence of divine blessing in one’s life, the concept of boldness was important. Charismatic Christians are bold because their immanent, and miracle-working God manifests in their actions, lives and bodies; He blurs the boundary between human and divine agency. By displaying the signs of divine empowerment to a greater audience, Charismatic Christians give, according to their own discourse, a testimony about the glory of God. A member of one of the churches described the function of conspicuous consumption like this:

“**If somebody is poor and wears old clothes (...) the unbelievers would not respect him. But if you look nice they will show respect. They say: ‘There must be something with that person.’ It is because of this that God wants us (...) to be successful and to be well dressed.”**

But still the question remains: how does the claim of boldness, success and prosperity connect to the experience of migrants, who are mostly not what would be called successful according to the German standard? In this respect it is important to note that the portrayal of Ghanaians in Germany as marginalized and racialized migrants dominant in the academic literature on African migrants in Germany overlooks the fact that most of them remain socially incorporated in Ghana. By transferring consumer goods and money, by acting as patrons for their extended
families and by building large houses, many migrants create visible proofs of prosperity in their country of origin. Due to differences in wage level and buying power between Germany and Ghana, it is economically possible to achieve the material symbols of a middle-class status in Ghana by doing one or more menial jobs in Germany. Moreover, Ghanaian transcontinental migrants often have an education above the national average in Ghana, from which they deduce status claims. But although many Ghanaians conceive of themselves as members of the middle class in Ghana, the majority has at the same time a lower class status in Germany, in terms of income, the prestige connected to their occupation and their social identity as “black foreigners”. Thus, the maintenance of simultaneous and multiple incorporation results in a transnational status inconsistency, which I call the paradox of migration. Migrants have to cope with this experience of having two different mutually incongruent status identities connected by a paradoxical link: The gaining of status and prestige in Ghana is achieved by losing it in Western Europe. Viewed from this perspective, the ritual emphasis of achievement and success I found in the Charismatic churches relates to an important aspect of the identity of Ghanaian migrants normally not acknowledged by the wider German society. And even those migrants, who have not a secured legal status, have no house in Ghana and no job in Germany, have a realistic chances to achieve it in the future. But, nevertheless, if we include the social status in Germany, the claim of the migrants to be successful achievers is obviously an exaggeration. As I argue below, it also from the migrants’ point of view rather an interpretive reconfiguration of the status paradox of migration than a realistic representation. One common way of processing paradoxes and contradictions is to temporalise them. They can be understood as unfortunate simultaneity of the non-coeval; some aspects of the present might be considered as remnants of the past and some as anticipators of a future, in which the problems of the present are solved. Charismatic Christians do exactly that. They process the status paradox of migration by temporalising it. It becomes reinterpreted along the lines of a narrative of progress, in which the negative aspects will be left behind. In this respect the
emphasis on an ontological temporal break (Meyer 1998a) is of special importance. By highlighting that the past is essentially different from the presence and the future an imaginary of disruptive discontinuity is created. A crucial concept in this respect was the notion of “breakthrough”, meaning that the spiritually empowered believer had to “break through” confining structures in order to reach the next level of blessing. It was highlighted that a new and better state of being could be achieved step by step. The prototypical break with the past is the experience of conversion; to become ‘born again’ as it is described in the wider Pentecostal and Evangelical discourse. In being “born again” a pre-conversion identity is symbolically left behind and a new image of the self is created. But de facto becoming born again was depicted only as the first and most important “breakthrough” in a whole series of breakthroughs; the concept did not signify a concrete goal to be reached. It rather created a syntax of disjunction applied over and over again to the ambiguous and contradictory elements of the present. Thereby, the inconsistency of social status of the migrants in relation to an idealized image of their selves became temporalised. It was depicted as expressions of a state of transition. And, it was promised, that the ambiguities of the present can and will be overcome with the next breakthrough, which always lies just before the true believer. Charismatic Christianity thus creates a strong feeling of progress and upward mobility. But this had only to be loosely coupled to the fact whether it takes place outside the church, according to socio-economic variables, or not. Although conversion to Pentecostalism often motivates people to change aspects of their day-to-day lives, such as abandoning relations to non-Christians or abstinence from alcohol and drugs, I would emphasize for my case that the narrative of breaking with the past was much more a means of a reinterpretation of the experienced ambiguities of the present than a practical means of overcoming them. The status paradox of migration was processed religiously but not solved.

Generally, the rapid global spread of Pentecostalism and Neopentecostalism across cultural, social and geographic boundaries in the course of the last decades, invites comparative
anthropological thinking about the ways and means with which Pentecostalism deals with the dilemma of a global belief system: to adapt to many different contexts while maintaining some of its particular features. The temporalisation of contradictions and inconsistencies - in respect to images of the self, questions of collective and individual morality, status positions and imaginaries of modernity and tradition - appears to be a very widespread feature of Pentecostalism. Because of its high level of abstraction, it is adaptable to a wide range of different contents without changing its formal structure. If I may be allowed to overstretch my reflections a bit into the realm of theoretical speculation, I would argue that one aspect, which makes Pentecostalism so attractive globally, is that it provides the believers with religious means to deal with experiences and aspirations of continuity and discontinuity. As Mathijs Pelkmann, Virginie Vaté and Christiane Falge (2005) have pointed out in their essay, there seems to be a link between the disruptive social changes in the last decades and an increasing conversion to Pentecostalism. The described mechanism of temporalisation might help to understand this co-variation. It is a religious means of construction of personal consistency under the conditions of social inconsistency.

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References


