A New Christianity for a New South Africa: Charismatic Christians and the Post-Apartheid Order

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Abstract
The international growth of Pentecostalism has seen a rush of congregations in Africa, many of which have tapped into a range of both local and global trends ranging from neo-liberal capitalism to tele-evangelism to youth music. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this discussion focuses on the main Johannesburg congregation of a grouping of churches that have successfully engaged with aspects of socio-economic transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Such engagement has involved conspicuous alignment with aspects of contemporary South African society, including an acceptance of broader policy projects of the nation state. I argue that the use of a variety of symbolic and thematic elements of a secular nature in the Sunday services of this church reminds and inspires congregants to consider wider social perspectives without challenging the sacred realm of faith.

Keywords
Pentecostalism, Africa, post-apartheid, nation state, secularisation, African Renaissance

A Brochure Cover
Between 2000 and 2003, the cover of every monthly information booklet published by His People Christian Church in Johannesburg featured a tinted photograph of two hands whose palms were placed together in a traditional attitude of Christian prayer. Irrespective of the different colour tinting, however, it was always clear to even superficial inspection that the right hand was substantially lighter in skin tone than the left. This visual abbreviation for racial unity and tolerance aptly embodies Nelson Mandela's iconic phrasing of post-apartheid South Africa being a ‘Rainbow Nation’. The promotion of ethnic plurality is one of several strategic factors that have made His People Christian Church (HP) well known within the wider community of independent churches in South Africa. The following discussion therefore looks at
some of the ways in which a church and its congregation have incorporated into their services and activities a variety of performative, graphic and thematic reference points that parallel contemporary attitudes towards the promotion of a multicultural and distinctly African identity in South Africa.

This incorporation speaks of a revalorisation of the local that balances more international institutional links. It also reaffirms underlying ties with the trajectory of the nation state that belies a recent emphasis on the transnational dimensions of Pentecostalism evidenced by Corten & Marshall-Fratani (2001) and Miller & Yamamori (2007). These ties solidify an evolving social dynamic whereby some religious communities have reflected the successes of the nation state, thereby exemplifying Gellner’s (1997: 77) observation that Protestant-type religions in general have a certain ‘affinity’ with nationalism.
What differentiates a South African Pentecostal community from others? What sort of symbolic elements feature in the services of a church at the forefront of developing Christianity in Africa? Can a religious community possess amicable relationships with capitalism and the nation state in the developing world? These and other questions are answered by drawing upon ongoing anthropological fieldwork conducted since February 2003, mainly in Johannesburg, but also in Cape Town. The main aim of this discussion is to situate His People Christian Church, Johannesburg, within South African society as a whole and to explore the potency of this connection. First, I present a background to Pentecostalism before turning to an institutional overview of the HP congregation. Second, I discuss socially symbolic elements that form a broader visionary frame for the regular Sunday services. Last, I connect the theme of ‘nation’ in this religious community to the wider social and cultural context of South Africa as a distinctly transitional society. The promotion of this theme can be understood as a form of conscious social insertion that carries with it primary values regarding the place of the Church in the future of the country rather than, as Comaroff (1985) discusses with respect to Zulu Zionism, the place of a congregation vis-à-vis the history of the country (and the present of poverty). My discussion ends with the suggestion that at least some of the success of HP relies on its ability to utilise secular symbols and practices that tap into values of social reconstruction and economic achievement that are an integral part of wider elite relations in post-apartheid South Africa. This conclusion has some parallel with Max Weber’s classic analysis of new forms of religion and his pairing of religious innovation with the expansion of capitalism in Europe (1958). In contrast to Weber’s Protestants, however, HP has clearly fostered perspectives that reinforce their religiosity with more localised forms of secular expression and identity sensitive to their own social context. While I do not suggest that this religious community promotes some form of ‘civil religion’ in the vein of Robert Bellah’s (1967) overt connection between politics and religion in the United States, it is nevertheless clear that Bellah’s (1970) later criticism of a mechanistic dynamic between the sacred and the secular bears need of greater ethnographic scrutiny.

Influencing the Secular Realm

His People Christian Church, Johannesburg, is one of a growing number of congregations that fall within the broader Pentecostal tradition of worship to which a quarter of the South African population was affiliated by 1980 (de Gruchy 1995: 98). Although categorical placing is a matter of debate (see Frahm-Arp 2001: 43-60 passim), the largest of these Pentecostal congregations
in South Africa is the South African Zionist Church, which counts over six million members drawn from among the country’s population of approximately 45 million. Each Easter weekend, some two million people from among its overall congregation converge on the town of Pietermaritzburg to hold the largest gathering of Christians in the world (Synan 1997: 284). In the process, they also produce vast traffic jams that clog up the northeast of the country for several days, a physical as much as spiritual testimony to their presence within South African society.

The issue of social influence is central to examining how Pentecostal congregations understand their place in society as a whole. In this sense, it is important to recall Garner’s suggestion that Pentecostal churches act as agents of social change in South Africa (2000: 310). HP is much the same as many of its Pentecostal brethren in this respect. Church leaders actively exhort members to bring about social and cultural change by promoting Christianity in both religious and secular arenas, partly by way of members becoming influential role models within wider society. After all, the original slogan for His People was:

SAVING THE LOST, LOVING THE SAVED, RELEASING LEADERS

This slogan combines the idea of personal salvation, which is the basic thrust of mainstream Christianity, with that of compassion and, thirdly, social leadership. Such leadership is understood to be necessitated in a time of troubles, a part of the millennial tendency of Pentecostalism as a whole (Cox 1995). The wider implication is that religious belief is about changing society as much as about saving it, and that this is achieved by one becoming a leader in society—a part of the elite—in order to use one’s position for both individual inspiration and collective evangelism. Reference to an elite is not casual here, for, like the Ghanaian case analysed by Gifford (2004: 115), there is an underlying expectation of achievement within the HP congregation that is both encouraging of secular success and self-defining of an upwardly mobile membership. This elite sensibility marks out HP in contrast to many other Pentecostal congregations, such as the South African Zionist Church, precisely because of its positioning within the wider class hierarchy rather than in fundamental opposition to it. In this sense, the religiosity of HP not only constitutes a 'symbolic reconstruction' (Comaroff 1985: 253) of the self through belief, but also a symbolic realignment of the self with the nation state and its demarcations of social status. It also marks out a very different source of membership for the congregation given the traditional association of Pentecostalism with the poor and the marginalised. This is doubly true in the South
African context where Pentecostalism has been analysed as a response to the exploitation of the urban proletariat (Sundkler 1961) or as a belief system that provides ‘indigenous workers with an order of symbols, concepts and practical forms that promised novel resolutions to the problems of living between the impoverished worlds of rural subsistence and wage labour’ (Comaroff 1985: 177). Such essentially Marxist analyses see Pentecostal congregations as hemmed in by modernity or its set of marginalising power relations. Help is provided within the community, but without the prospect of a significant change in material circumstances. Thus, Pentecostalism becomes understood as a band-aid for the poor at the foot of exploitative capitalism, a forceful dynamic that ensures the continued attraction of, especially, Zionist churches among South Africa’s poorest population. In contrast, HP’s alignment—if not alliance—with the forces of capital and the state demonstrates a far more symbiotic relationship with power, one whereby modernity acts as an underlying platform for action and reflection rather than an antithesis to personal identity. In part, this is because His People embraces its social environment, a context where neo-liberalism itself is a primary project of the nation state in post-apartheid South Africa. At HP, reference to the nation is never cursory, and concern for it is concretely expressed through regular prayer meetings explicitly dubbed a ‘Prayer for the Nation’ that as recently as May 2008 took place every Wednesday. Yet before investigating the relationship between religion and particularly the nation state, it is necessary to review the relevant historical context.

**Apartheid Context**

The Azusa Street Mission of Los Angeles is generally recognised as the modern origin of Pentecostalism. However, De Gruchy finds its South African beginnings in Johannesburg amid the first Zionist congregation of 1895, along with Petrus Le Roux’s later Zulu congregation in Wakkerstroom (1995: 85). Maxwell asserts that Pentecostalism finally coalesced through the introduction of ‘spirit baptism’ with the arrival of five Indianapolis missionaries in 1908, adding that early services were interracial at first (Maxwell 1999: 246). This dimension was quickly challenged by various forms of segregation within the Apostolic Faith Mission congregation by 1909 (Maxwell 1999: 252). Such separation was paralleled within other main congregations of the time such as the Assemblies of God and the Full Gospel Church (De Gruchy 1995: 90). It would soon be reinforced by the increasing institutionalisation of apartheid policies. This was especially so after the gazetting of the so-called ‘church clause’ of the Native Laws Amendment Bill in 1957, which attempted to force
racial segregation by restricting ‘black’ people from attending services in designated ‘white’ residential areas (De Gruchy 1995: 95).

The apartheid regime favoured the Dutch Reformed Church, a dour offshoot of Continental Calvinism that became the official, state religion. The clergy of the Dutch Reformed Church, many of them members of the secretive Broerderbond society, were ensconced firmly within the Afrikaner (or Boer) community and were closely allied with the racial prejudices of the apartheid system (see Fawcett 2000, also De Gruchy 1995: 89-92). In contrast, most of the English-speaking Christian churches aligned themselves behind the democratic opposition. Pentecostal congregations, however, sat on both sides of the political divide—and many ignored it altogether. This latter indifference arose from a ‘negative reaction to the social and political activism of the mainline churches’ but also fed their congregations with members ambivalent about the secular role of the church (De Gruchy 1995: 101).

Within the Pentecostal tradition, the leading Rhema Bible Church initially supported the Pretoria regime through both sermon and prayer (Gifford 1991: 36-37). While there is no clear connection between Pentecostal divisions over apartheid and the fact that many initial converts in South Africa came from the ‘Dutch Church’ (Maxwell 1999: 250-251), Synan has noted that:

Rhema is best known for its strident preaching of the gospel of prosperity, which certainly has a political role in South Africa, diverting attention from the system [of apartheid] which disproportionately favours the Whites, and telling good Christian Whites that faith will bring them even more wealth. (1991: 36)

Ironically with respect to such ‘prosperity theology’, the end of apartheid and a change in political fortunes roughly paralleled a jump in materialism and consumerist tastes that has not abated since. This escalation was fuelled in part by globalisation pressures and the reincorporation of the South African economy into international trade flows. Upon coming to power, the ANC’s rejection of its former socialist policies in favour of neo-liberal growth and investment strategies encouraged a significant shift in the new elite’s public attitude towards the accumulation of wealth, as well as the translation of political connections into economic power (see Heribert, Slabbert & Moodley 1998). Such a revision of elite persona has had significant impact upon society as a whole, and today it is the politician turned businessman who is the new icon within South African society from top to bottom.

Political leaders who have exchanged the rhetoric of class consciousness for that of the boardroom have found ideological sympathy in suburban Pentecostal churches that preach a familiar ideology of moral austerity and social progress, on the one hand, yet clearly appreciate the trappings of material
success, on the other. In such a contradictory way, South Africa is very much a part of a growing affinity between an international spectrum of ‘born-again’ Christians (as exemplified by the Religious Right in the United States) and the economic expectations of a post-liberation society. This affinity has parallels with other parts of Africa, including both Zimbabwe (Gifford 1991: 46-80) and Ghana (Meyer 1998a; also Gifford 2004). As the case of Ghana demonstrates, there may be a closer connection between postcolonial society and Pentecostal attitudes towards consumption than previously considered (Meyer 1998b). Somewhat ironically, this relationship raises the spectre of widening class differences as much as creating overarching spiritual communities with the power to knit together previously antagonistic ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the very act of joint religious celebration takes on extra meaning given South Africa’s history of racial segregation. As Vuyisile Matlope (24), a Sowetan-born Economics graduate now working for an insurance company in Johannesburg, reminded me in January 2005:

If you look at South Africa, like in the past 10 years, it has been the white folks who go to church with only white folks. Even the guy that worked for the white folks wouldn't go to same church as the white folks. The black folks would go to their own church. And black folks would be taught different things because of our restrictions, mental restrictions and abilities. And by that, I mean from a black folks' point of view, God created men and no one is superior to any other one. From a white perspective, it was always that intuition that white people are more superior to black people. And it has to do with the Apartheid era. But now that you find those cross-cultural people coming together in one place, that just defies what has been put in the past [into people's minds] . . . because that's the way it should be and nothing else.

Matlope has been a member of the wider HP congregation in Johannesburg ever since his student days at the former Randse Afrikaans Universiteit (RAU). His mention of congregational diversity brings into reference both the organisational structure and the community values promoted within HP.

Organisation and Values

On an organisational basis, His People Christian Church in Johannesburg is part of a larger, regional family of His People congregations in fifteen major South African cities, four neighbouring countries (Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and overseas (the UK, Italy, Hungary and Austria among others). These congregations are in turn linked to an international association of Pentecostal churches known formerly as Morningstar Ministries with its headquarters in the United States, a connection that builds on a strong American influence within HP’s institutional history. In 2004, this larger associa-
tion (with affiliates in 46 countries and growing) changed its name from Morningstar to Every Nation—in line with a more secular and global image that nevertheless directly refers to scripture (Revelation 5: 9) while implicitly harnessing the association of modernity with the building block of the nation state (see Gellner 1983, also Smith 1996). This entwining of modernity and secularity feeds into the expression of a range of social ideals that His People members promote in an open and candid manner. These ideals are summarised by a set of ‘core values’ that are nominally religious in character but also blanket a broader range of general community inclinations that include a strong bias towards business forms, rhetoric and achievement. Such a bias is fully consonant with broader currents in South African society, and especially powerful given Johannesburg’s role and reputation as the continental bastion of capitalism (Czeglédy 2003).

The core values of His People are expressed through five primary terms: Lordship, Evangelism, Discipleship, Leadership, and Family. They act as the basic hermeneutic glue that holds together the congregation and are a thematic touchstone for sermons, Bible School lessons, home ‘cell group’ discussions and other forms of instructional engagement within the congregation. Beginning in 2005, however, an increasing emphasis on developing both ‘multigenerational’ and ‘multicultural’ sensibilities within the Church’s community has taken place, thereby making two important additions to this anchoring vocabulary. Given the nature of the current discussion, it is the mention of multiculturalism that stands out here, not least because so much of the exponential growth of His People churches in and outside Johannesburg rests on the way in which the ameliorative tendency within born-again Christianity has been utilised to incorporate new members from a wide range of ethnic and social backgrounds.

In such terms, the issue of ‘race’ is tremendously important within the HP community, largely as a badge of the church’s success in integration, along with a very strategic thrust to developing young black pastors at the exact time when creating a generation of ‘African’ leadership is on the agenda of the state as a move away from residual structures of power in society. For white members of the congregation like Susan Roberts (37), a specialist accountant at one of South Africa’s major banks, HP also provides a welcome entrée into the Rainbow Nation of ethnic diversity, an important product of the national imagination that morally validates many South Africans’ sense of self-worth vis-à-vis the international arena of social projection. Susan’s upper-middle-class background never gave her much opportunity to make friends with people outside her ‘racial group’ under apartheid. Since joining the church when studying at the University of Cape Town in the early 1990s, however, she has developed friendships right across the colour spectrum. Now:
I know a lot of people from other [ethnic] communities… Yes, nearly all of them I met through the Church. That’s one of the great things about His People, you know. One can easily meet the sort of people that perhaps you wouldn’t get to know otherwise…

Her admission is significant for its appreciation of the integrating character to HP: an ability to attract and bridge very different communities under one roof. Vuyisile Matlope (noted above) addressed the issue of diversity within HP by explaining to me:

I [would] go so far as saying that [HP’s congregational composition] is reflective of what you would find in South Africa. Because the different types of cultural backgrounds, different cultural groups that you find in church are the very same cultures that exist within the county itself. So, I would say that it is symbolic of what the country should be. And… Yah, you might still find people working together in companies and from cross-cultural backgrounds, but it doesn’t necessarily guarantee and mean that they are working together effectively. And I feel that within the church that’s where you get to—to the nitty-gritties of why I have to get beyond the skin colour. I am not only doing it because the guy would provide financial benefit for me—as it would be in a business setting. So it’s more of a, not a partnership thing which is forced onto people because of their work activities. It is a personal choice, because you choose to go to church or not to go to church. And you have your reasons. Because going there doesn’t make you immune to every other race that you would find there. Because you have to interact with those people. Because that is the culture of His People.

On a historical basis, this institutional ‘culture’ is rooted in the Western Cape, for the Johannesburg congregation is actually the second in terms of institutional founding—although its success and regional influence has led to a vague form of joint leadership with the ‘mother church’ in Cape Town. The main Johannesburg congregation numbers some 3,500 active members drawn from a metropolitan catchment area far beyond the physical surroundings of the church itself. Most members come from other charismatic churches, some of them arriving when Living Word, a local church, folded both congregation and pastorship into the HP community. About one-third of the congregation regularly attends one of three Sunday services. Parallel services occur at two separate university campuses and, as of October 2005, began to take place at satellite venues within the larger metropolitan region. A recent, and strategically significant, addition is in Soweto, where Sunday services are held in a building that ironically still functions as a shebeen (unlicensed tavern) on Saturdays.

The holding of campus-based services is no mere afterthought for two reasons, one historical, and the other structural. First, the birthplace of His People was in Cape Town’s university quarter of Rondebosch in 1988, and this
background has since become a foundation stone for institutional identity. At the time, this circumstance led to a very young—but also very ‘white’—complexion to the original congregation. More recently, such a mono-ethnic dimension has been more than balanced by the sort of upwardly mobile, mixed-race couples and black tertiary students that the church actively welcomes as a sign of its progressive nature, particularly given the history of racial division found within South African Pentecostalism (Anderson 2000: 58-63). Such heterogeneity differentiates His People from many other religious congregations in South Africa which remain substantially bounded by ethnicity. On the level of social politics, it also ties HP directly into contemporary forms of racially oriented political transformation, on the one hand, and (far more indirectly) affirmative action opportunities on the other. In this way, His People Johannesburg actively seeks to mirror the composition of society at a time when the issue of representation has become such a trenchant institutional requirement in the country. This simultaneity was best expressed by Senior Pastor Roger Pierce in 2004, after he took over the ‘stewardship’ of the Johannesburg congregation from Bill Bennot, its founding pastor from the United States: ‘Multiculturalism… this is a church of many [cultures]. It’s a far better product, if you are going to use that word. We are going to build a multicultural church…’

Second, the primary form of recruitment into His People has always been through its university campus presence. Such a presence is an important part of the strategic direction that this religious community is taking in terms of cementing its future, for its avowed intention is to preach the ‘Word of God’ to the youth above all. At major universities across the country, His People student activists organise recruitment drives during the initial registration period. They are reputed to focus their attention on students from the professional faculties who will graduate into high earning/status jobs: law, medicine, engineering and, especially, commerce. This recruitment thrust, whether conscious or not, has resulted in HP campus congregations possessing a not entirely unwelcome aura of aspiration: not simply middle-class, but socially and professionally ambitious too. As a consequence, when I spoke to a number of Christian students at the University of the Witwatersrand about His People in February 2006, this group of seven (rushing to a different church meeting) quickly agreed with one of their number, who answered for them all by stating: ‘His People? They have an elite image on campus—for sure! Sometimes it’s as if they think they are better than the rest of us [students from other campus congregations].’

Throughout the academic year, His People student groups host various topical seminars in order to attract further attention amongst the inquisitive student body. In March 2005, for example, His People churches even hosted
a collective ‘Student Leadership Camp’ in Bloemfontein, the former judicial capital of the old South Africa and the birthplace of J.R.R. Tolkien, to whose Lord of the Rings trilogy a special, two-hour evening service was dedicated, mainly with the aim of showing how the work should be understood as a parable for the Christian fight against evil. In the innovative fashion that is routine at His People, the sermon was visually punctuated by selected scenes from the first movie instalment (The Fellowship of the Ring), viewed on the church stage’s projection screen. Iain Shippey, the lead pastor for the evening, told the congregation that The Lord of the Rings is essentially a form of myth, adding that myths have an important purpose in our lives, principally because of what they remind us about. He said that all myths contain three messages:

1. Things are not as they seem.
2. The world is at war.
3. You and I have a part to play.

These three statements compact a wealth of theological and material implications that can be temporarily reduced for the sake of manageable commentary. They emphasize to the devout (i) their personal place in a Christian world separate from the earthly illusion around them, one which can only be understood in the literal truth of the Bible; (ii) the real presence of evil and the prize of eternal salvation—or everlasting damnation; and (iii) the active role of the individual in deciding the fate of humanity. As Gifford has suggested, there is room here for comparison with New Age religions in that Pentecostalism also preaches ‘success through a positive attitude’ (Gifford 2001: 37). Additionally, they both employ ‘self-help’ idioms, and lay primary stress on the individual as well as on personal decision. Such decision is twofold in my experience at His People. First, it refers to the point of conversion whereby individuals give themselves over to God. Second, it challenges members of the congregation to expand their activities within the Kingdom, as the wider community of Christianity is often termed. After all, as Pastor Shippey put it: ‘Frodo and Sam are part of a greater story and they have a part to play… God chooses some of the people we least expect to accomplish the greatest of things.’

**Sunday Performance**

Mention of the term ‘audience’ underscores the essentially performative nature of Pentecostal Christianity and underlines why its services fall under the ‘best tradition of spectacle’ as noted by Roland Barthes (1957: 99). Performative,
because as an essentially experiential tradition Pentecostalism involves behaviour that is at least mimicked if not learnt and practised. In the loose but evocative terms of Schechner, such behaviour ‘isn’t free or easy’ (1985: 118). Moreover, it is crucial to understanding how HP has adroitly tapped into wider societal trends.

At HP, the performance of faith is best represented by the Sunday services that are but one facet of the institutionalised activities—or ‘ministries’—of its energetic congregation. Sunday services act as the main focus of attention on a collective level, largely because they facilitate a believer’s connection with God. They also generate common experience across the entire congregation, acting as the chief occasion for religious conversion and affirmation, moral instruction, prophetic communication and other forms of divine inspiration. In this sense, His People corresponds directly to charismatic Christianity, wherein religiosity ‘has to do with experience of God rather than thinking about God’ (Smail 1993: 50). This fundamentally experiential quality ensures that ritual objects, and especially visual symbols, do not play a part in the worship of the service, instead, they act as floating reference points for its broader institutional identity as a part of society on a non-religious basis.

The largest Sunday services for His People Johannesburg are held in a main venue in the elite suburb of Parktown North, a central location for the wealthier residents of Johannesburg (see Czeglédy 2003). From this perspective, the church’s very setting bestows significant social status upon more aspirant members of the congregation. The quite ordinary, brick building resembles a multipurpose conference venue, although it functions as a single-use facility. Along with upper-storey meeting rooms, it features a double-volume auditorium significantly bereft of decoration until 2007. Instead of wooden benches, there are rows of upholstered, light brown chairs subdivided into three major blocks. In the absence of a fronting altar, there is a stage with a wrought iron and glass lectern whose frontal cross-strutting features the head of a lion, that most quintessentially African of beasts. In the absence of decorative windows, one’s attention is immediately drawn to the hanging projection screen on the back wall. Only two over-sized flowerpots and the monochrome blue and red banners that flank the stage are evidence of the ceremonial function of the space. There is no religiously significant, sacred symbol present, not even a cross such as might fall within Turner’s (1972) formal assessment of ritual symbols. According to Susan Roberts (noted above), one of the first members of the Johannesburg congregation formed in 1997, the minimalism of overall decoration allows a person ‘to focus your attention during a service’. In a parallel vein, Senior Pastor Roger Pierce understands most traditional religious iconography to be a distraction from ‘real worship’. Nevertheless, what
decoration there is acts as a visual frame for the inevitably smooth performance that follows, a performance that parallels the Ghanaian ethnography of de Witte (2002) in many respects. Where it differs, however, is in the discreet yet potent alignments between the sacred and the secular, between His People and South Africa/Africa.

Generally, the introduction to a Sunday service is a short welcome from the bandleader. Often, it is simply: ‘Welcome! Let’s stand together and sing and praise the Lord!’ The congregation quickly gets to its feet and the church band (on stage) plays the first of between five and seven songs that take up at least the first 35 minutes of the 90-minute service. The combination of singing and intermittent prayer that follows is colloquially known as ‘Praise and Worship’. As this title suggests, there is little distinction between song, prayer and other forms of communion with God. This is in line with Calley’s argument that Pentecostal congregations do not differentiate between belief and ritual, and that rituals are ‘performed for their own sake’ as ‘expressions of the solidarity of the church, a celebration of togetherness’ (1965: 72, ix-x).

The members of the His People band are young musicians, mostly in their late 20s or early 30s. The music produced by drummer, electronic guitarist, keyboard player, saxophonist, percussionist and others is a varying combination of folk, gospel and rock genres drawn from American and British Pentecostal sources (Frahm-Arp 2001: 75). The mainly soft-rock-based material eschews traditional hymnals and is highly derivative of contemporary pop music. Some tunes even feature the familiar slow-fast-slow interludes in the grunge-rock technique made popular by Seattle’s Nirvana in the 1990s. On rare occasions, a large acoustic horn (fashioned out of natural bone) is blown to punctuate the music. The horn sounds like some ancient bellowing call, and members of the congregation have told me that it mimics the sort of instrument used by the earliest Christians—a way in which HP consciously connects itself to the robust purity of a biblical past untainted by later corruptions. This interpretation closes in on Martin’s declaration that ‘... Pentecostalism is primitive Christianity as it emerged two millennia ago on the despised margins of the Roman Empire: lay empowerments of the Spirit in alliance with aspirations to holiness and wholeness.’ (2002: 4)

At times, a djembe hand drum or double drum is employed to provide that special ‘African’ feeling, one that always ensures a warm reception from the congregation. This reaction comes irrespective of ethnic background, and exemplifies how HP has adeptly harnessed the contemporary appreciation for non-European cultural reference points in post-apartheid South Africa. Even more so, a heavy ‘drum & bass’ soundtrack in the style of South African township music called kwaito provided the aural backdrop for the 2004 Christmas dance show put on by HP’s youth organisation. This unconventional choice
of music was not arbitrary, for *kwaito* is the most iconic symbol of South Africa’s youth culture today (Stephens 2000), and its usage sends a powerfully contemporaneous message to the audience. In the context of postcolonial attitudes to freedom of expression that remind one of the restricted in time (under apartheid) and space (to the townships), this sort of aggressive recital has greatest symbolic impact upon black members of the audience: it galvanises the congregation to shouts, whistles and ululations that vocally mark HP services with a unique badge of celebration combining performance with culture with a newly inclusive sense of national celebration. Such performative motifs have considerable resonance among recent members of the congregation, some of whom hail from other parts of Africa. Take the case of Samuel Ogbu (36), a Nigerian immigrant who lives in Midrand and works double-time as both a car dealer and real estate agent in the Midrand area lying between Johannesburg and Pretoria. He used to attend the main Rhema church in Johannesburg’s Rivonia suburb. It was his South African wife who first introduced him to His People and, as he tells it, the distinctly African sensibility of HP services immediately made an impression upon him:

> When I got there first, the worship they had [was] this more African kind of worship. So it was more of a family . . . It took me to a new realm with God. The worship was kind of heavy. The folk songs, the music they were singing . . . they were home-ly!

The congregation knows most of the songs by heart and sings along—there are even ‘greatest hits’ that quickly become recognisable to the patient listener. A regular feature of most services is at least one song sung in an indigenous language (with words and translation projected onto the stage screen simultaneously). In Johannesburg, this song is generally in Zulu, while at His People Cape Town it is in Xhosa. The use of differing languages strategically reflects major ethnic groups of Gauteng and the Western Cape provinces respectively, just as it draws the congregation into celebrating the country’s ethnic diversity by way of vocal participation.

While the band plays, the lead soloist belts out her vocals and the backup singers add their talents to the show. In the auditorium, a happy sort of delirium quickly takes over. Voices ring out, people sway to the rhythm, clapping and shuffling their feet; they raise their hands in the air, and several literally dance in the aisles. The physicality of the congregation’s response is infectious and according to Corten (1997: 30) pace MacRobert 1988: 30-1) is Africa’s major contribution to Pentecostalism. Its favour among the congregation points towards a conscious objection to the narrow set of responses found in mainstream Christian churches. Additionally, such unscripted dancing gives an archaic stamp to the proceedings that might fit into R.R. Marrett’s famous
claim that ‘... savage religion is something not so much thought out as danced out’ (1914: xxxi)—were it not that here such performance is understood to re-create the freedom of expression considered a part of early Christianity and its closer, more immediate, connection to God.

As I stand in my usual place at the south-east tip of the seating formation, I begin to count the congregation members with their hands outstretched in now familiar gestures of spiritual supplication. Their facial expressions and body movements have superficial, but important cross-cultural resonance with indigenous forms of ‘ecstatic religion’ (Lewis 1989) and spiritual healing in Africa (Katz 1982: 93-116 passim). Most of the congregation are still singing, but already some have begun to ‘speak in tongues’, an activity which is the most important act of divine communion at His People. In so doing, they make the connection between the Sunday service as collective celebration, and as individual exhibition. Ironically, these persons thereby become the most involved participants in the service just as they experientially remove themselves from the rest of the audience by demonstrating the divine in them. Their expository drama amplifies Maurice Bloch’s (1985) claim that ritual fundamentally refers to the other-worldly, that it is something removed from historical events and that it is a form of discourse that has no referential meaning to the everyday. At the same time, such glossolalia exemplifies the power of ritual symbols as ‘a mobilisation of energies as well as messages’ (Turner 1972). Within these believers, it demonstrates the truth of their faith as much as symbolising it. This congruence is important when considering notions of modernity and experience. So although Asad informs us that modernity:

... employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, of cruelty and health, of consumption and knowledge. The notion that these experiences constitute ‘disenchantment’—implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic and the sacred—is a salient feature of the modern epoch. (2003: 13)

It is just as true that the Pentecostal notion of the sacred, of religious experience as ecstasy similarly stripping away the cognitive veneer of material reality to reveal an absolute truth that is transcendental, is also the case. In this way, the sacred in faith is understood to perform the very same role as the secular in analysis: to secure sight of an underlying, universal reality.

Various Messages

Invariably, the last song is a slow tune. As the music fades, the Pastor’s voice delicately enters its last bars, gently moving over the melody in solemn prayer.
He finishes quietly, then adroitly switches gears by asking people to greet and shake hands with each other before handing over the microphone to a colleague. What perks up the audience at this stage is very specific: a quick call-and-answer greeting between a second pastor and the congregation spoken in anywhere from three to seven, or more, different languages one after another. This verbal skipping game plays off traditional forms of rote communication within indigenous communities and deeply resonates with the way in which anti-apartheid political rallies were once begun and many contemporary public meetings still are; it moves from one language to another so that the audience is confirmed in the only way that supra-local identities are represented in the new South African Constitution—through the multiplicity of its eleven official languages. At the same time, it stamps both service and congregation with an African diversity appreciated by congregationists such as Samuel Ogbu (noted above), for whom the languages employed in the Sunday service made a critical first impression:

The greeting . . . The greeting that they normally do . . . The greeting after the praise and worship: the greeting is normally done in African languages. They try to recognise everybody from different cultural backgrounds. Everybody different but in one body of Christ . . .

There comes an emotional lull during a list of announcements that detail current church activities. Some of them mention ongoing ‘missions’ to other African countries, a connection to the rest of the Continent not unnoticed by foreign congregants. After the announcements, the lead Pastor intones a prayer from the front of the stage, asking the congregation to bow their heads ‘as the Offering is taken up’. The keyboardist plays a quiet tune as the ushers pass along the purple velvet donation bags in which people deposit coins and paper money, as well as the more significant cheques to be placed in tastefully printed envelopes provided by the Church. The ushers themselves can be instantly identified by their fashionable leopard-print vests which present a mnemonic cue reminding any South African of the country’s ‘Big Five’ wildlife attractions, and the way in which such references to the animal kingdom remain the only uncontested symbol of national pride.10 Such symbolism has even wider reach, for by incorporating this most conventional of themes representing ‘Africa’ to itself (and others), attention is paid to a leading design and interior decoration trend in post-apartheid South Africa.

At His People Johannesburg, the sermons that follow the Offering both challenge the congregation and morally coach it. They last about 30 minutes and often begin by questioning the faith of the audience, then letting them know that through their belief anything can be achieved. Irrespective of topic, the central message of self-empowerment is paramount, a message that combines religious
dedication with the broadest notions of social change advocated by the post-apartheid state. A number of dominant (but not exclusive) secular themes are present from sermon to sermon as well as in the closing prayer that follows: retaking the city (of Johannesburg), building the nation (of South Africa), and professional success and influence through God’s graces. In addition to them stands out a preoccupation with Africa, in particular with an inspirational Africa as opposed to its international image of poverty, disease, war and destitution. For instance, Tom Descule, a pastor visiting from Harare, proclaimed during the Church’s two-day ‘Living Word Conference’ in April 2003 that, in religious terms, ‘…the wealthiest continent in the world is Africa!’ In a similar vein, Bill Bennot, His People Johannesburg’s founding pastor, informed the congregation the month previously that ‘I believe that Africa is the greatest sowing field on the planet!’

This positive message was taken even further through the lyrics of a choral performance at HP in October 2004, when a youth choir sang:

We are the children
Africa’s children
We look at the dawn
Because it’s an African dawn!

Such a message resonates with church leaders and laity alike. It affirms their place in the world as much as in the Kingdom; it gives them purpose and pride in strongly declarative terms. A level of patriotism is often a part of such language, for South Africans like to think of themselves as the leaders of their continent and even the moral leaders of the world as exemplified by Nelson Mandela, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, etc. A belief in such an international role is shared within the congregation inasmuch as this belief provides an uncontested platform for the assertion of a common and positive national identity. At the same time, it stands as a call to religious arms, a challenge to lead the evangelistic crusade over borders and across oceans. Consequently, HP has not hesitated to conduct what it calls ‘church planting’ in both Hungary and Italy, countries whose populations may be staunchly Christian, but not ‘re-born in the Spirit’. As Roger Pierce, the Church’s second Senior Pastor, prophesied in August 2005: ‘I believe that South Africa will become a light to the nations!’

**Nation and the Secular**

Maxwell’s historical explication of the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God shows the advantages of establishing a tie with nationalism for Pentecostal churches in Africa (2006: 102-103 and *passim*). At His People Johannesburg, the pro-
motion of a commitment to the local—through symbolic elements and references which concretise the national and continental totality—runs counter to Appadurai’s (1997: 10) more general observation that it is the failure of the nation state’s promises of modernisation that has encouraged the peoples of the developing world to re-assess and re-align their lives within global modernity. Importantly, his observation is linked to predicting the end of the nation state (1997: 19-21), a somewhat premature assertion given the post-apartheid scenario. This is not least because in South Africa it is the re-organised state itself that has claimed the legitimacy of identity through a new political dispensation, thereby becoming the central focus of individual as well as collective assertion in the failed wake of apartheid’s own nation-building project. Churches such as HP which are in segue with reforming the community of the nation in the general terms of government ideology act as important vehicles for cross-validation precisely because they involve a ‘redirection of identity’ (Davies 2002: 91). Their adoption of a congregational variety both supports and is supported by the government’s emphasis on ‘diversity’ as a main policy thrust. Their encouragement of socio-economic mobility is also in line with government policies of ‘transformation’ to create an ongoing redistribution of power within society. This redistribution has the State seeking to alter the unequal terrain of wealth by providing material advancement through a wider economic restructuring process that features the transfer of capital to formerly disadvantaged population groups. As a consequence, both democratisation and capitalism now function as primary and popular tropes for the revitalised nation state, and the theme of transformation, in particular, finds meaning in trajectories of personal affirmation that embody Martin’s (2002: 132-133) notation of how African Pentecostalism favours fluidity and flux as a result of its historical predicament vis-à-vis colonialism. This is important when reflecting on the millennial character of Pentecostalism, especially when it comes into conjunction with nation-building as the primary meta-project of the state.

The millennial dimension to faith at HP is evident in conventional ideas of salvation to be found throughout Christian thought, as well as in their articulation with important parallels that fall within the conceptual frames of rebirth, authenticity and agency that infuse Pentecostalism on a more fundamental level. This is particularly so when considering that ideas concerning the Pentecostal restoration of an ‘original’ Christianity closer to God are shaded by the re-emergence of majority political power since 1994 and its associations with a state of collective authority that is once again representative of the population. Similarly, the conception of a congregation as a ‘true’ (or genuine) community of the faithful unblemished by ceremony, dogma or a mediating theocracy is paralleled by the development of a true (or truly representative)
community of citizens framed by universal enfranchisement. Such congruence finds a material sibling through HP’s institutional commitment to developing the financial status of congregants, a mission that is most clearly fostered through its Business Network, but also found in dedicated sermons that relate ‘biblical principles’ of wealth creation, financial management and investment. Such sermons correspond to a more general reclamation of material prosperity for the majority population; they build on the opportunities provided by government-led economic restructuring in terms of ownership (through the official policy of Black Economic Empowerment) as well as the country’s re-integration into world trade flows after the lifting of economic sanctions and the disestablishment of protectionist trade policies in the 1990s.

Reintegration into the world economy—and polity—finds particular favour among those Pentecostal congregations in South Africa that seem intent on ‘re-sacralising the assumptions on which [Capitalism] depends’, as Coleman (1995: 161) puts it when discussing prosperity theology in a Swedish context. At HP, an integral part of such re-sacralisation is the nation state itself, for the church is intent upon increasing Christian influence within both economy and polity in its expansion of the ‘Kingdom [of God on Earth]’. Pastor Roger Pierce put it this way in July 2003:

I believe that we are coming into a new season of prosperity for the church.
I believe that it is coming about as we do business with God.
This church is meant to be a prophetic church for the nation.

While such a statement does not stipulate the aim of creating a specifically ‘Christian state’ in South Africa, it does advocate a commitment to social engagement above the micro-level, one in tune with Casanova’s observations on a wider ‘de-privatization’ of religion in general (1994: 5-6 and passim). Such process depends substantially on a ‘re-politicization’ of both the religious and moral spheres, one whereby:

Religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between nations, states, civilizations, and the world system. (Casanova 1994: 6)

At HP, the debate over boundaries was addressed by Carl Stauffer, one of two speakers for the afternoon workshop on ‘government’ at the church’s third annual Real Life Conference in 2008. He began by reminding his audience
that ‘God has not called me into politics. He has called me to engage with politics.’ But later he called out:

- Brothers and sisters—
- We need pastors in the government!
- We need pastors in the parliament!

Such exhortation speaks directly to a vision of national influence. Not surprisingly, at HP the project of evangelism is often spoken of in tandem with projects of the nation state, particularly those to do with policy-oriented premises such as the Rainbow Nation and the African Renaissance. Whether this linkage is an institutional response to external conditions of power, or a matter of this church heading the crest of a broader wave within society, is difficult to tell—and perhaps unwise to judge at this early stage. What is clear is that His People seeks to actively dissolve any boundaries between the sacred and secular, to reinvest the public domain with religious concerns (à la Casanova 1994), and to re-inject religion into everyday life, irrespective of the successes or failures of the nation state. In fact, at His People the most significant failures of the state in South Africa (crime, corruption, service provision, the alleviation of poverty, etc.) are ascribed more to the workings of Satan than to any specific human or institutional agent. Consequently, politics can remain a part of any given sermon, while the mention of controversial political figures is conveniently filtered out of the discourse. In his turn, Satan is concretised as a real presence in the material world—but very differently from Taussig’s (1980) symbolic analysis of peasant resistance to capitalism. More precisely, the Devil is an active force to contend with, one that is often invoked as working through a variety of unnamed agents who may (or may not) be conscious of such motivation. Partially because of this ascription, which lies closely in tandem with the sort of missionary attitudes towards diabolism described by Meyer in her historical ethnography of the Ewe (1999), neither the nation state nor its acceptance of global capitalism takes on the sort of negative connotations described by Comaroff (1985: 168, pace Sundkler 1961) in the case of Zulu Zionism wherein religion reconciles the individual with their social marginality through symbolic and ritual means. Instead, HP embraces both the nation state and capitalism, acting as a bridge to both sacred health and secular wealth. This perspective fits neatly into the place of His People at the centre rather than the periphery of class dynamics in South African society. It also invokes the sort of conscious realignment of the self with power that has always been a part of transitional societies undergoing radical transformations of both polity and economy. Such a
re-alignment is a natural progression for any individual (or institution, for that matter) interested in taking advantage of the flux of social relations to re-establish themselves vis-à-vis new forces, agents and relations of authority.

With such a perspective in mind, Coleman's (2003) mention of a ‘re-sacralising’ religious revival nods at one of the major debates in contemporary studies of religion, namely that dealing with secularisation and the place of religion in society. At the risk of oversimplification, the discourse on secularisation stands on two legs; one deals with diminishing numbers and the other focuses on declining influence (Casanova 1994). Greatest interest now lies in the latter whereby religion seems to have lost many of its wider societal and public functions and become just another subsystem of activity within the increasingly compartmentalised lives of people (Dobbelaere 1995: 3). This general thinking is consonant with broader perspectives on modernity that draw on Max Weber’s vision of a transformed society wherein traditional religious authority and the rule of arbitrary power have been superseded by rational secular authority and functional logic based on merit, procedure and efficiency. In this way, the inverse relationship between modernity and the sacred forms the very basis of individual redefinition through the advent of secularisation. Moreover, as modernity gains ground, the ‘overlapping consensus’ (Asad 2003: 6) of secularism allows for the nation state to accept different reasons in type when subordinating subscription to a principle of its ideology. Ironically, this process fits neatly into the way in which His People sets itself apart from society through belief yet symbolically works within the system of public symbolic devices (visual, rhetorical and thematic). In effect, the relative lack of HP doctrine and the emphasis on faith as performance becomes a flexible strength by way of accommodating different paths to a singular—yet general—religion created in practice as much as belief.

Nevertheless, the tie between HP and secular iconography brings its own set of limitations. Primary among them are divergent attitudes towards ‘traditional’ aspects of South African culture promoted during the terms of office of both President Mandela and President Mbeki. In this respect, the post-1994 state’s formal recognition of indigenous political leaders such as hereditary chiefs, ‘royal’ families, etc., and its attempts to incorporate sangomas (traditional healers) and inyangas (spirit mediums) within the broader frame of the healthcare and community systems, entails a level of ideological acceptance that is problematic for many conservative Pentecostal churches. This is so largely because of the real (and imagined) connections it makes between underlying practices of ancestor worship, the legitimacy of leadership in local communities, and wider dimensions of moral authority within society. Ironically, the significant exceptions to this bias are Zionist congregations whose
syncretistic, religious traditions can be considered more of ‘a refinement of Christianity in relation to African experience’ (Kiernan 1995: 122). At His People, however, ancestor worship—let alone theological syncretism—is anathema. Yet, in spite of this stance, a short article by Pastor Simon Lerefolo on the very subject is indicative of the diplomatic way in which HP has navigated the difficult path between cultural inclusion on the one hand, and theological prescription on the other.11 Basing his reasoning on passages from both the Old Testament (Ecclesiastes 9: 4-6, Isaiah 8: 19, Deuteronomy 18: 10-11, Chronicles 10: 13-14) and the New Testament (Timothy 2: 5), Lerefolo distinguishes between ‘learning from, honouring and holding in high esteem family members who have died’ and ‘worshipping, consulting them and believing that they have an influence over our affairs’. This argument cordons off the intrinsic theology of the church while simultaneously recognising the presence of non-European customs in the congregation. It thereby manages to balance belief within the smaller community with social obligations tied to the wider traditions of present—and prospective—congregants.

Contemporaneity

In spite of divergences between HP and government, the symbolic cues that have been covered in the preceding discussion add up to a significant direction in the way in which His People has incorporated changes in wider South African society that favour certain cultural motifs, forms of performance, and even ideological values. The design aesthetics, the use of certain languages, the incorporation of specific musical instruments and styles, the themes of the sermons, etc., act as important points of reference in a community that has consciously rejected the conventional symbolic embroidery of organised religion just as many earlier independent African churches did (see Kiernan 1995). The presence of these symbolic elements reminds us of how Pentecostalists, in particular, have succeeded in drawing upon a wide range of localities that steady the tide of globalisation of which they may also be a part (see Robbins 2004: 130-131). This points towards a significant overlap with the grander cultural mythology of reassertion that has gripped the imagination of the nation since then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki first mooted the idea of an African Renaissance.12

More than a thirst for recognition within the geo-political community, the idea of African Renaissance foregrounds the prospects of empowerment and cultural re-appropriation—even if it incorporates a little (or a lot) of the sort of ‘invention of tradition’ initially detailed by Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983). For contemporary Pentecostal congregations familiar with employing a veritable
'bricolage of extremely heterogeneous elements' (Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001: 1), such coincidence does not go unnoticed. At His People Johannesburg, it is another opportunity to differentiate this congregation through the incorporation of essentially secular elements in a sacred setting, and to remind them of a specific identity without threatening the real play of belief that takes place within the believer rather than through external representative devices. In this sense, there is no contest between symbol and practice—even when considering a history whereby ‘the making of modern South Africa has involved a long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 4). This is not least because such secular symbols have remained intrinsically so within the church and its practices; they are present but muted, important for corporate identity but uncontroversial in the wider social sense and, ultimately, religiously insignificant.

All Sunday services end with an altar call that parallels Coleman’s research in Uppsala, Sweden (2003: 18-19). The altar call asks people to ‘take the Lord Jesus into your hearts’ and incorporates a collective prayer led by a pastor. It ends in a short farewell blessing from the pastor, after which the congregation filters out of the auditorium as individuals and families greet each other in friendship, exchange pleasantries and discuss mutual interests. At least half of the congregation walk past a series of visually sophisticated banners that first appeared in July 2005. These banners articulate HP’s ‘mission statement’, ‘core values’ and various ministries in a sophisticated style that merges multiple images, diverse text fonts and graphic overlaps in a way that is both reminiscent of and equivalent in standard to corporate/commercial artwork.

Until 2006, the other half of the congregation would pass by the only piece of pure decoration not part of the stage set in the main part of the auditorium. It is a huge, fabric print depicting the emblem of His People Church: a crimson sun disk resting behind a royal crown that is vertically transfixed by a regal sword. More important to the discussion at hand is, however, the graphic surround to this institutional emblem: a couplet of visual cues that mimic the church’s place within society. In a way that is fully consonant with how His People has culturally positioned itself in South Africa, the HP symbol is surrounded on the left by leopard strips and on the right by zebra strips. This decorative field is further bracketed by the oversized likenesses of two and three lion cubs respectively. In this way, a nominally secular theme is incorporated into a religious standard as a wider frame of context: the bordering animals which surround the HP emblem become visual ciphers for South African society at large and the church is intrinsically connected to contemporary cultural tropes. Despite its visual prominence, the mural is never referred to by the leadership, nor is it a subject of discussion. This circumstance is actually

not very surprising, for like the other essentially secular symbols that infuse the referential system of His People, it remains a badge of contemporaneity rather than a sign of faith.
References


Notes

1. An early version of this paper was presented at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale in October 2005 and published in the Institute’s Working Papers series, number 49 in 2007. For reasons of anonymity, pseudonyms are used here for all laity, but not for its public representatives such as the Pastors or Elders of the Church who granted permission to use their names in publications.

2. In February 2004, His People Johannesburg began to publish this brochure every second month; from August 2005 it has appeared every three months.

3. The phrase, an adaptation of Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s ‘Rainbow people of God’, entered popular and political discourse through President Mandela’s inaugural address of 11 May 1994.

4. When in 2004 the larger association of Pentecostal churches to which His People is now affiliated underwent what amounted to a corporate ‘makeover’ in marketing terms, a new macro-slogan was introduced: ‘EVERY NATION IN OUR GENERATION’.

5. For a historical background to Pentecostalism under late apartheid and afterwards, see Anderson (2005).

6. Ironically, South Africa has been a major concern for the Christian Right in the United States, largely because of the country’s former status as a battleground with communism (Gifford 1991:33-36).

7. In the November/December/January 2006/7 edition of HP Johannesburg’s brochure, these two conceptual terms appeared as a combined sixth ‘core value’, and have been promoted so ever since.

8. 28 March 2004.
9. The Youth Ministry has its own name, in tune with the contemporary penchant for conspicuous misspelling among the young: *Hiz Diziples*.

10. Published in the August/September/October 2006 issue of HP’s congregational brochure.

11. Published in the August/September/October 2006 issue of HP’s congregational brochure.