

# **Belonging and Success: Religious Vitality in an African Metropolis**

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*Abstract:*

Orthodox historiography on the interplay of religious change and urbanization departed from theoretical accounts on modernity and frameworks of growth and decline, and concluded that cities were major places for the development of secular culture. Religious vitality in African cities contradicts such trends, thereby raising important questions on the relationships between modernity, religion and the urban experience. Drawing on field research in the South African city of Cape Town, this essay offers three interrelated sociological propositions that help explaining why the urban experience is crucial in shaping the significance of religion for modern subjectivity and sociality. I argue that it is specifically in urban South African contexts where emerging challenges to belonging and success are understood and acted upon through religious practice.

Within their historical anthropology of the interplay between missionary Christianity and colonialism in South Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Comaroff and Comaroff depicted the missionary encounter as a “long conversation”. In the course of this conversation, the European ‘civilizers’ had to recognize that while they had initially set out to making “other into same”, their African interlocutors had either only fashioned themselves as nominal Christians, or alternatively re-fashioned Protestant Christianity in their own image. “From the perspective of the missionaries themselves”, the authors argued, “(...) the effort had two discrete dimensions. The one, aimed at securing converts, was dominated by the sacred narrative, the “good news of the gospel. The other was the civilizing quest, which involved a struggle over the very fabric, and the fabrication, of everyday life.”<sup>1</sup>

With the emergence and consolidation of African initiated churches in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but specifically with the final emancipation of mainline Christianity from the late colonial power apparatuses of the apartheid system in 1994, this conversation has turned into a self-interrogation amongst South Africans themselves, and is now placed in a complex global field of cross-stimulations. But what explains its current vibrancy? As I wish to argue in this essay, it is specifically in urban South African contexts where emerging challenges to belonging and success are understood and acted upon through the “sacred narrative”. This also urges us to reconsider received wisdom on the relationships between religion and modernity. Drawing on field research in the city of Cape Town, I will offer three interrelated propositions that help us to explain why the urban experience is crucial in shaping the significance of religion for modern subjectivity and sociality.<sup>2</sup>

### *Religion and Modernity: Secularization and beyond*

Within 20<sup>th</sup> century social and political theory, changes in the fabric of society have been predominantly reflected in the various theoretical accounts on *modernity*.<sup>3</sup> These accounts

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<sup>1</sup> J. & J. Comaroff. 1997. *Of Revelation and Revolution. The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. Vol. II. Chicago, 7.

<sup>2</sup> All accounts on religion in contemporary South Africa testify to the continued religious vitality; compare R. C. Garner. 2000b. Religion as a Source of Social Change in the New South Africa. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30. 3 310-343; A. Anderson. 2001. *African Reformation. An African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century*. Trenton.

<sup>3</sup> For recent sociological theorizations, see P. Wagner. 1994. *A sociology of modernity: liberty and discipline*. London & New York; *ibid.* 2001. *Theorizing Modernity: Inescapability and Attainability in Social Theory*. London; A. Nassehi. 2006. *Der Soziologische Diskurs der Moderne*. Frankfurt/M; for an anthropological critique, J. & J. Comaroff (eds.). 1993. *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, Chicago; the sociologically most influential anthology on ‘multiple modernities’ is certainly S. N. Eisenstadt

were highly influential for the sociology of religion in that they provided the major categories through which to interpret religious change in the West. The analysis of these changes were formulated and theorized through the paradigm of *secularization* in which modernity was understood as (1) pushing a turn towards inwardness and subjectivity, and thus towards privatization and the withdrawal of religion from the public sphere (Luckmann), (2) increasing the autonomy of religion through social differentiation (Parsons), (3) effecting declining levels of religious affiliation and belief, and (4) reducing the subjective plausibility of faith through rising cultural pluralism and a structurally enforced ‘heretical imperative’ (Berger).<sup>4</sup> Critiques of the monolithically conceived models of modernity and secularization already surfaced in the sixties, and are thus much older than the recent emphasis on ‘multiple modernities’ suggests.<sup>5</sup>

While the Western pattern was complex and plural in itself, the experience of non-Western societies further complicated the picture. Overall, classical theory of modernity – by virtue of its universalistic claims – entailed the built-in assumption that the Western experience with its European and US-American variants would provide a blueprint for the ‘developing world’, that secularization would be a corollary of the successful export of the developmental package, made up of market-based economy, secular state, liberal democracy, modern science and technology.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it also implied the promise that modernity could replace the quest for ‘deliverance’ by ‘desires for inner-worldly salvation’ (Plessner).

Many of the theories of secularization were, as Charles Taylor (2007) has recently

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(eds.) 2002. *Multiple Modernities*. New Brunswick; for anthropological conceptualizations of multiple or alternative modernities, see A. Appadurai. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis; P. Geschiere. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft. Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville; a concept of vernacular modernities is articulated in J. Ferguson. 1999. *Expectations to Modernity: Myths and Meaning of Urban Life in the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview, see D. Martin. 1995. Sociology, Religion and Secularization: an Orientation. *Religion*. 25. 295-303; K. Dobbela. 1984. Secularization Theories and Sociological Paradigms: Convergences and Divergences. *Social Compass* XXXI/3-4; O. Tschannen. 1991. The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 30. 4. 395-415; for classical statements: T. Parsons. 1968. Christianity, in: D. Shils (ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. New York; Th. Luckmann. 1967. *The Invisible Religion. The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York; an influential critique was also formulated by Th. Luckmann. 1980. Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos. in: *ibid. Lebenswelt und Gesellschaft: Grundstrukturen und gesellschaftliche Wandlungen*. Paderborn, München, Wien & Zürich. 161-172; the recently most widely received reformulation is J. Casanova. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> D. Martin. 1965. Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization. In: J. Gould (ed.) *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences*. London; for a cogent critique of the usefulness of the concepts of multiple or alternative modernities with regard to sub-Saharan Africa, see J. Ferguson. 2006. Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development, in: *ibid. Global Shadows. Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham & London. 176-193.

<sup>6</sup> A more powerful critique of such theoretical connections was therefore to originate from studies in anthropology, most vividly articulated in the work of Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and E. Evans-Pritchard.

argued, not only “substraction theories” according to which parts of an imagined whole of religious experience were successively abolished.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, they perhaps also constituted, as Casanova points out, one of the few, if not the only, paradigmatic statement sociology has ever produced.<sup>8</sup> It was only towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the sociology of religion reflexively came to terms with its dual character as a *product of*, and a *discourse on modernity*. Research on the various kinds of religious resurgences – in the West, but especially outside of it; before, but particularly after the end of the Cold War – has helped to put the secularization paradigm into perspective. It has also shown that expectations to secularization outside of the West did not fulfill. Religious resurgences are increasingly seen as the ‘other side of modernity’, deploying modern technologies in spite of anti-modern rhetoric; as partially emerging from the very dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled promises of, and expectations to, modernity; and as using the spaces of cultural pluralism that modernity had opened up. Scattering the ontological certainties of the ‘age of progress’, the *pluralistic* situation of late, post-, second or global modernity has opened new, if precarious, ‘windows of plausibility’ for religion.

#### *Religion and the Urban Experience*

Since urbanity was conceived as an essential part of modernity, and since much of what the modern stands for – personal autonomy, cultural pluralism, industrialization and political participation – is made possible by urbanization, cities were in principle seen as hotbeds of secularization. A brief look into classical antiquity reveals the perennial character of such assumptions: While cities, such as Greek Pergamon with its monumental Athenian consecration cults, were centres of both, political and religious power, modern concerns with the city’s govern-ability were already anticipated – at least by the religious custodians of morality – as faithfully testified for instance in the image “the whore’ Babylon.

Historiographies of the modern interface of religion and urban experience in the West seemed to corroborate such concerns and at once shed light on the way secularization practically worked. Social uprootedness through migration, the power of anti-clerical political movements, the failure of churches to meet the ‘religious demand’ as well the exposure to cultural pluralism – all of these developments seemed to fortify secularizing trends and create the great secular cities of the West such as Berlin, London

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<sup>7</sup> See Ch. Taylor. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Boston.

<sup>8</sup> See J. Casanova. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago.

and Paris. Especially from a Durkheimian perspective that lays major stress on religion as integrating a homogeneously conceived polity, the industrial city was indeed a place of religious anomie. But is there an alternative way of writing this history?

Following Hugh McLeod, the orthodox view on the intimate connections between urbanization and secularization was seriously challenged by ‘revisionist historiography’ emphasizing the variety of religious situations, the ability of churches to adapt and respond to social change, the emergence of new missionary strategies and institutions, and thus: creativity.<sup>9</sup> He also points to the need of moving beyond a historical framework based on growth and decline,<sup>10</sup> and to focus instead on the change from relatively homogeneous religious cultures to the polarized and relatively fragmented religious structures characteristic of contemporary cities. Is this approach helpful in explaining and theorizing religious vitality in a South African metropolis? I think it is, particularly if we place the religious dynamics, of which fragmentation is at once cause and effect, in the broader social context of the challenges people in Cape Town face in their everyday lives. These can be neatly summed up in the notions of *belonging* and *success*, and I contend that similar to the case of Cape Town, it is the dialectics of belonging and success that structure religious vitality in many of the dynamic mega-cities in the contemporary world. In order to substantiate this claim, I offer three ethnographically grounded propositions.

#### *Ambivalent Passages – Dynamics of Migration*

The majority of the black population residing in the townships of Cape Town, capital of the comparatively prosperous Western Cape, are Xhosas originating from the economically poor Eastern Cape province. And most of them arrived to Cape Town as economic migrants after the apartheid-based residential restrictions were eventually abolished at the end of the 1980s. Biographical accounts of migrants reveal that economic motifs for migration – unemployment, poverty and poor future prospects in the rural areas – are typically linked to much more encompassing ideas: hopes for self-improvement, social upward mobility, consumption, self-realization and personal freedom. If interviewees thus declare “I was looking for a better life”, they were mostly

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<sup>9</sup> See H. McLeod. 1995. *European Religion in the Age of the Great Cities 1830-1930*. London & New York; 15, 19, 24.

<sup>10</sup> An extraordinarily significant achievement in this regard is Danièle Hervieu Léger’s “Pilger und Konvertiten. Religion in Bewegung”, Würzburg 2004.

driven by what Ferguson (1999) had called “expectations of modernity”.<sup>11</sup> Looking back in retrospect, that is, from the *city to the rural home*, the Eastern Cape is described as specifically backward, poor and abominable, as a place where one is denied opportunities as much through their structural absence as through limitations imposed by kinship obligations and what now appears as ‘traditional culture’ in general.

What people see when looking back, of course, depends on the experiences they have made after their arrival to Cape Town, and on how they interpret them. If social upward mobility materializes but conflictual relationships to city-based kin and community prevail, people may feel they have traded success for social belonging. In these cases, but even more so if the material life situation does not appear to improve, religious communities – especially the Pentecostal congregations scattered across the townships – emerge as primary cultural spaces where a new sense of self and belonging is forged. There is thus a strong religious dimension connected to the passage from countryside to the city, which solves some problems while raising others.

Religious teachings in the Pentecostal churches are often characterized by a highly critical view of inherited cultural practices, which are more strongly prevalent in the rural areas such as ancestor worship, traditional healing, spirit possession, and witchcraft.<sup>12</sup> This creates further tensions in relations to kin remaining in the Eastern Cape especially if these, as is often the case, are strong. Almost all Xhosas were already ‘nominal Christians’ before arriving to Cape Town. But if the migration to Cape Town is linked to the entrance to a Pentecostal congregation, religiosity and everyday practice, for example in relation to health and healing, tend to become partially ‘purified’ from traditional elements. While the passage to Cape Town already equals a ‘conversion to modernity’ in the secular sense of access to formal labour markets, civil society and political participation and pluralistic consumption, it now also implies a more thorough conversion to modernity in the religious sense.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, rather few migrants abolish their adherence to ancestor veneration altogether. It is especially the belief that ancestral spirits are bound to the soil, that is, to people’s place of origin, that keeps migrants continuously entangled in affairs ‘back

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<sup>11</sup> J. Ferguson. 1999. *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London.

<sup>12</sup> Van Dijk argues that the success of African initiated Pentecostal churches can be explained by the fact that they provided a space for coming to terms with spiritual, especially malevolent forces that mainline missionary Christianity never recognized. See R. Van Dijk. 2001. Time and Transcultural Practices of the Self in the Ghanaian Pentecostal Diaspora. In: A. Corten & R. Marshall-Fratini. *Between Babel and Pentecost. Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*. Bloomington & Indianapolis. 216-234.

<sup>13</sup> P. van der Veer (ed.). 1996. *Conversion to Modernities. The Globalization of Christianity*. New York.

home' on both, spiritual and practical levels. This is illustrated in the fact that even long-term city residents wish to be buried in their village of origin. Arranging the transport of corpses, however, is an extremely costly affair and can easily consume the family income of various months. A priest from Cape Town therefore complained in despair: "We spent more money on the dead than on the living!" My point here is that the *cultural passage* from village to the city, or 'backwardness' to modernity, remains fundamentally ambivalent. The dialectics of success and belonging are not only deeply imbricated with this passage and given a profoundly spatialized meaning; they also explain how the ongoing search for identity through the creative appropriation of both, inherited tradition and Christian messages fuels religious vitality in social ritual and subjective representation.

*The Gospel of Prosperity/ The Prosperity of the Gospel*

Migratory passages in contemporary South Africa articulate the linkages between economic processes and changes in subjective religiosity. However, addressing and responding to rising aspirations to economic success and consumption, Christian theology has itself expressed these concerns, most vocally in the so-called Gospel of Prosperity, thriving in Pentecostal and Charismatic communities across the global South. Whereas until the middle of the 70s, African initiated churches were more concerned with 'Africanizing' Christianity so as to transform it into a vehicle for an authentic cultural experience against a culturally dispossessing colonialism, the gospel of prosperity offers a radical re-orientation to a modern, urban, and industrial global society.<sup>14</sup> With its focus on consumption it also remarkably differs from earlier Pentecostal doctrines suggesting asceticism and austerity as the sanctioned Christian path to success.<sup>15</sup> Many authors have pointed out that by emphasizing the possibilities of salvation in *this* life and *this* world Pentecostal discourse has managed to provide an articulation of widespread experiences of social suffering, unemployment, poverty and illness. Meyer even argues that experiences of illness in a broad understanding are primary incentives for joining Pentecostal churches.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, research has shown how the rise of the gospel of

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<sup>14</sup> See Anderson, fn 2.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance E. Brusco. 1995. *The Reformation of Machismo. Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia*. Austin.

<sup>16</sup> B. Meyer. 1998. 'Make a Complete Break with the Past': Memory and Postcolonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostal Discourse. In: R. Werbner (ed.). *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*. London. 182-208.

prosperity emerged as a religious mode of appropriating the effects of the 1980s economic crisis.<sup>17</sup>

By and large, what has been left unaddressed, however, is how these processes were linked to the accelerating urbanization and its changing patterns. In Cape Town, the association of townships with poverty, and of residence in the city proper with affluence has given way to a differentiated gentrification of the township itself. Economic inequality becomes an experience to be made “across the street”: Affluence is more visible and calls for religious legitimacy, as well as for religious advice on how to achieve it. At the same time, the massive influx of migrants has broadened the demand for, but also the market of, religious offers. It is with the constant proliferation of new churches through the transformation of the Cape Flats<sup>18</sup> into a mega-township that the dramatic expansion of conversionism and the “shopping for religion” (van Binsbergen) has been made possible. This provides for both, the mixing of socio-religious circles as well as for the differentiation of religious affiliation along the lines of economic success. Quite obviously, the heretical imperative – instead of pushing secularization – has led to a religiosity by choice. Success may affect this choice and turn belonging into a volatile, indeed liquid commitment (Bauman). But the disappointment of hopes for affluence does not (yet?) seem to impinge upon the prosperity of the gospel.

#### *The Dynamics of Faith-based Benevolence*

Belonging becomes imperative if access to the club of the successful in both, its abstract and concrete expressions, is denied. Apart from high levels of church attendance, religion has proven significant in offering spaces for belonging through networks of faith-based volunteerism and solidarity. The rapidly growing structure of faith-based ‘institutionalized altruism’ and benevolent practice runs virtually parallel to the existing churches and denominations and has profoundly re-worked the religious field. Some churches have practically morphed into service-providing NGOs and are publicly perceived as such. With regards to issues of secularization and religious vitality, two competing trends are salient: On one hand, the volunteering engagement in faith-based organizations has fortified the place of religion in the urban fabric, and it has indeed provided both, a space for the practical realization of belonging and an *alternative notion of*

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<sup>17</sup> See for instance on the case of Tanzania P. Hasu. 2007. Testimonies of Poverty and Prosperity in Tanzanian Charismatic Christianity. In: *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Gesellschaftsforschung und Universalgeschichte*. 17.5/6. 115-130.

<sup>18</sup> The term ‘Cape Flats’ refers to the series of predominantly black townships, such as Gugulethu, Langa and Khayelitsha, extending eastwards from the city proper towards the city of Stellenbosch.

*success* for unemployed and otherwise economically marginalized people. This is most powerfully expressed through the idiom of ‘calling’ by means of which religious volunteers articulate the subjective satisfaction that charitable work affords them. Through their integrating effects, the practices of assistance and solidarity originating here undoubtedly also contribute to the govern-ability of the city. On the other hand, the increasing engagement in civil society-based social service provision has drawn religious actors into dynamics of institutional isomorphism to the extent that the boundaries between the secular and the religious have become progressively blurred.<sup>19</sup> Recurrent debates among volunteers about the specific “Christian values” they are meant to convey through their work, however, also remind us that these boundaries are constantly contested.

Current developments in South Africa’s cities have opened a new chapter in the ‘long conversation’ amongst South Africans about Christianity. They have set in motion, and provide the social context for, negotiations about everyday life in which both, belonging and success are essentially understood through the ‘sacred narrative’. The ‘civilizing quest’ of which Comaroff & Comaroff had spoken, has meanwhile turned into the question of how to live a modern life that is subjectively meaningful and socially attainable at once. The three propositions made above have highlighted how religion contributes to answering this question. They have also revealed that in the pluralistic culture of urban South Africa, religious practice easily criss-crosses inherited dichotomies, such as tradition vs. modernity, solidarity vs. interest, etc. Rather than a debris of tradition, these practices are very much a product of modernity, just as the contemporary challenges to belonging and success, which they help articulating.

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<sup>19</sup> On institutional isomorphism, see P. J. DiMaggio & W. W. Powell. 1983. The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review* 48.2, 147-160.