

SEVEN

Going and Making Public

Pentecostalism as Public Religion in Ghana

BIRGIT MEYER

RELIGION IN the public sphere and public religion have recently become much-debated issues and research foci in the study of religion, identity, and politics in Africa. There are good empirical reasons to evoke these and related terms so as to further our understanding of the place and role of religion in society, as I have also experienced in my own research in Ghana over the past twenty years. Between 1988 and 1992, over several stints of fieldwork, I conducted research on the African appropriations of Christianity and the appeal of Pentecostalism.¹ During that period, the country was governed by the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) of J. J. Rawlings, who had come to power through a coup and wielded full control over the media in the context of a one-party system. Remarkably, while limiting Christian churches' appearance in the media, the first Rawlings government (1979–92) assigned radio time to the neotraditional Afrikania movement that criticized “brainwashing” by Christian conversion and propagated African traditional religion as a respectable and authentic alternative. Afrikania echoed the PNDC's cultural policy of *sankofa*,² which strove to leave behind Christian ideologies in favor of an African identity grounded in indigenous cultural heritage. From the mid-1980s onward, churches—especially Pentecostal ones—became extremely popular. Notwithstanding their increasing appeal, which was at least partly due to people's growing disappointment with the government's inability to deliver “development” and “progress,” they played a minor public role.

Copyright © 2011. Ohio University Press. All rights reserved.

However, returning to Ghana in 1996 for a new research project on popular culture (in particular, popular video movies), I noted much to my amazement that the public sphere had undergone a big transformation. Under the pressure of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the PNDC had instigated a democratic constitution, implying the gradual liberalization and commercialization of media such as film, radio, television, and newspapers.³ The new radio and television stations were to be formally secular, yet at the same time operated on a commercial basis. Many Pentecostal churches immediately seized the new opportunities to buy airtime and became a markedly public force.⁴ While the appeal of Christianity was not new as such, I was struck by its public omnipresence, as well as the fierce public attacks leveled against local religious traditions and Afrikania. Flooding the public sphere, Pentecostal images and sounds devoted to “spiritual warfare” were impossible to be ignored in southern Ghana.⁵ This had immediate implications for politics. As, under the aegis of democracy, politicians now had to compete for votes, many of them started to use Pentecostal churches as stages for a ritual cleansing from past sins and for the performance of a cleansed, born-again identity. During the campaign for the elections in December 2008, the mobilization of Pentecostalism by politicians was unprecedented in its intensity, with the presidential candidate (and then the elected president) John Atta Mills openly supporting this brand of Christianity, and seeking spiritual support from the Pentecostal Nigerian preacher T. B. Joshua.

Puzzled by these new developments, along with many scholars witnessing similar processes throughout Africa and elsewhere, I developed a keen interest in the manifestation of religion in the public sphere in general, and in the rise of the latest variant of Pentecostalism—with its flamboyant pastors, skillful use of media, emphasis on the prosperity gospel, and mobilization of a mass following—in particular. While religion’s regained public vitality is widely recognized today, scholars are only beginning to address the theoretical issues raised by its public reemergence in our time.

Before sketching the stakes in current debates about religion in the public sphere, it needs to be noted that the term *public* itself is far from clear. *Public* can refer to matters that concern a community as a whole, being open to all persons and hence generally known. Following from this, a public is a group for which what is qualified as public is accessible. While, taken in this broad sense, *public* is a term that pertains to

matters and groups characterized by openness and accessibility; it is at the same time a normative, specific concept that is grounded in post-Enlightenment modern Western societies. For Jürgen Habermas,⁶ as many interlocutors and critics have noted, the rise of the public sphere marked the emergence of a new sphere for critical and rational debate that was independent from either the state or the market. In the German original, the term *Öffentlichkeit* is used for both the public sphere, understood as the sociospatial arena of debate, and the public, understood as the body constituted by participating in this arena.

The coexistence of a broad understanding of *public* in terms of openness and accessibility and a more narrow, historically specific understanding is quite confusing, as it mixes neutral and normative uses of the term. The normative understanding of publics and the public sphere often informs debates about and scholarly work on the nature of the public sphere. This comes to the fore markedly in recent, at times heated, discussions about the public manifestation of religion, in particular Islam, in northern European societies. Taken as a prime model of secularization,⁷ in this region religion had been confined to the private sphere. There existed a “secularist truce,” a secularist contract that guaranteed religious freedom on the one hand, yet banished religion from the public sphere on the other. However, with the rise of culturally and religiously plural societies, the secularist truce seems to be eroding. Secular and religious positions are at loggerheads, and that raises major questions about the nature of the public sphere as secular and religion as private by definition. While from a normative perspective that regards religion as a private matter, public religion is an anomaly, from an empirical perspective it is a reality. Its existence challenges the secularization thesis that posits an intrinsic relation between modernity, the rise of the public sphere, and the retreat of religion into the private sphere.

Quite a number of authors—including Habermas himself⁸—have argued that the exclusion of religion from our definition of the public sphere is challenged by obvious developments in Western societies that do witness—albeit to varying degrees—what José Casanova has called the “de-privatization of religion.”⁹ In his seminal book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor points out that religion in modern societies is subject to transformation, rather than simply vanishing or returning after a period of repression.¹⁰ In other words—and here Taylor’s perspective resonates with Talal Asad’s position outlined in *Formations of the Secular*—secularization changes modern religion instead of abolishing it.¹¹ While it may

be premature to circumscribe the current age as postsecular, it is high time to adopt a postsecularist approach that seeks to grasp what religion means in our time beyond the secularization narrative, the point being to understand how the relations between the religious and the secular, religions and the state, the public and the private, shift over time.¹² In doing so, it is important to be aware of the ideological and normative dimension enshrined in the use of the term *public* and to be alert to the politics of its use, rather than to unreflexively reproduce it in scholarly analysis.

From an Africanist perspective, recent scholarly work on the role and appeal of religion in the twenty-first century still appears Eurocentric. Even though the critique of the secularization thesis has raised scholars' awareness of the problematic confluence of theoretical and normative assumptions about the proper place of religion, it is still the case that such normative assumptions inform views of Africa as lacking institutions that promote democracy and civility and thus as lagging behind the ideal of the modern public sphere. It is one of the concerns of this volume to challenge such views with grounded historical and ethnographic explorations of how movements within Christianity actually become a public force and matters of public concern in Africa. The point here is to move out of the normative framework in which much thinking about the public sphere and publics still takes place and to adopt a broader understanding of public as common, open and accessible, as outlined above.¹³ Taking some distance will allow for a better understanding of the normative stakes of actual debates about the nature of the public sphere and public religion. We need to achieve a fruitful synergy between detailed empirical investigations and critical reflection on theoretical and normative concepts around public religion so as to advance a truly global understanding of religion in our time.

I find it useful to take a practical approach that investigates actual strategies and acts through which public religion materializes. It makes sense to distinguish between *going public*, assuming a public appearance through which a religion is visible and audible to others, and *making public*, the public expression of matters that hitherto were not open and accessible. Moving between the levels of historical and ethnographic work and theoretical reflection, in this chapter I highlight some important issues and raise questions for our understanding of public religion, in particular Christianity, in Africa.¹⁴ Although my main point of reference is the rise and popularity of Pentecostalism in Ghana, this chapter does not offer a case study per se.

I shall stress the need (1) to contextualize the rise of Pentecostalism as a public religion by taking into account historical legacies and current particularities that shape Ghana's public sphere, (2) to approach the public sphere from a praxis-oriented, rather than normative, perspective that explores how religious publics actually come into being through shared images, texts, sounds, and styles of binding, and (3) to consider limitations that follow from Pentecostalism's strong public appearance. My overall concern is to contribute to developing a broader research agenda on public religion, and the role of Christianity in African public culture, that links up with debates about religion in the public sphere, yet all the same takes into account the specificity of African lifeworlds.

Historical Legacies

The salient public presence of Pentecostalism across Africa currently receives much scholarly attention. However, it would be a mistake to regard the public manifestation of Pentecostalism—often regarded as public religion par excellence—as an entirely new phenomenon, as if earlier on religion in Africa would have been confined to the private sphere. The rise of Pentecostal-charismatic churches as a public force in the aftermath of “democratization” must be situated in a longer trajectory, paying particular attention to the transforming relationship between state and religion from precolonial to colonial and postcolonial times. While the modern notion of public (as opposed to private) cannot be applied to precolonial African societies in a meaningful manner, it is certainly the case that calling upon indigenous gods and spirits was part and parcel of (chieftaincy) politics, espousing an open and accessible (and thus public in the broad sense) as well as a hidden or secret dimension. With regard to the colonial period, it would be a mistake to assume that colonial administrations and missions, though introducing religion as a modern category into African societies,¹⁵ actually placed religion in the private sphere. Certainly within the policy of indirect rule, but also in the cooperation between colonial administration and missions in the field of education, religion was a strong public factor.¹⁶ Instead of taking the public sphere as a normative model that brings about a distinction between public and private spheres and locates religion in the latter, we need more detailed historical research on the meaning of *public* and the shifting place of religion—or better, religions—in African societies in the aftermath of colonization and independence. In this way it will be possible to understand the legacies of the past in Pentecostal ways of going public in our time.

Copyright © 2011. Ohio University Press. All rights reserved.

The contemporary Ghanaian state still faces the colonial legacy of the distinction between Christianity and traditional religion. It entailed not only the reconfiguration of indigenous worship practices as a less advanced kind of religion but also the significantly different valuation of Christianity and traditional religion with regard to their capacity to instill modern personhood and civic virtues. With the rise of Christianity as the religion of civilization and modernity—one that claims to open people's eyes—traditional religion was increasingly pushed out of the public sphere. Of course, this by no means put an end to local spirits and modes of worship, but it implied their relocation in a framework of backwardness and secrecy—a hidden and thus all the more powerful base to fall back on in times of hardship.¹⁷ The relocation yielded a complicated hierarchical relation between Christianity, which became public and respectable, and traditional religion as increasingly barred from view, yet recognized as all the more powerful. Based on this relational framework, it became the project of Christian churches to cast light on what was shrouded in the secrecy of traditional worship. This drive toward exposure—a kind of making public—underpins contemporary Pentecostal preachers' struggle to unmask the "powers of darkness" that are found to be at the heart of traditional religion. Thus, for Pentecostals the very act of making public is enshrined in a longstanding Christian mode of revelation that seeks to *unmask* what lies *hidden* behind the surface of appearances.¹⁸ Making public is thus not a neutral act but inscribed in a Christian logic of outreach and revelation.

What Is New?

There is a remarkable tension between Pentecostal modes of gaining public presence by going public and statements about secular democracy. In Ghana associations such as the National Media Commission and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice seek to insert civic virtues that befit the new democratic constitution into news reporting and media programming. In its report on broadcasting standards, the National Media Commission states that the content of religious programs "shall be prepared with due regard and respect for the beliefs and sensibilities of all religions." All the same, many Christian-Pentecostal programs on television and radio launch fierce attacks against traditional religion, and to some extent Islam. Even though television and radio stations are formally secular, much airtime is sold to Pentecostal churches that use the media according to their own logic, often employing spectacular

modes of bringing across their message. In the wake of the 2008 elections, journalists critiqued the remarkable preparedness of politicians to rely on spiritual forces, as this “weakens rationalization and reality of the development issues, so much so that even elites . . . who are expected to radiate higher reasoning to illuminate the development path, are under the heavy sway of the prophets, Voodoo priests, Malams, juju-marabout mediums, witchdoctors, Shamans and other spiritualists to the injury of Ghana’s larger progress.”¹⁹ Clearly, in the Ghanaian setting the emphasis on civic virtues embedded in secular democracy, on the one hand, and the spectacular public presence of (especially Pentecostal) religion, on the other, are at loggerheads.²⁰

In Ghana, as in many other African countries, the adoption of a democratic constitution *and* the concomitant liberalization and commercialization of mass media transformed the public sphere. This new public sphere not only involves citizens by granting them the right to elect and critically debate the government, it is also shaped by neoliberal capitalism and the forces of the market, which are eagerly seized by Pentecostal media ministries. No longer fully dominated by the state, Pentecostals got unprecedented possibilities for public manifestation, using commercial structures for the spread of the gospel. The simultaneous turn to democracy and commercial media allowed for the manifestation of Pentecostalism as a public religion.²¹ At stake is the emergence of a striking hybrid form that blurs Habermas’s classical ideal public sphere—with the salon and coffeehouse as the habitat of the responsible citizen—*and* what he described as a degeneration of this ideal model into a commercialized culture industry that addresses people as consumers. In other words, in Ghana, as in many other African countries, the public sphere is a new, open setting for critical debate *as well as* a stage for spectacle (especially miracles) and display of religious identity. This hybridity, and the ensuing ambivalence and contestation, should be at the center of our research on religion in the current public sphere in Africa. While the public sphere hardly conforms in practice to normative positions grounded in secular democracy, it is all the more important to study such positions in action, as they are mobilized against religious encroachment.

Not only is the actual public sphere more messy than one might assume on the basis of a normative and Eurocentric position that associates it with civic values and secular democracy, public religion itself also has distinctive features. Common views of Christianity are challenged

by the ways in which Pentecostal-charismatic churches appear in public and propel a distinct imagination of the world by making skillful use of the mass media. In a marked distinction to Max Weber's analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Calvinists and Puritans in *The Protestant Ethic*²²—all too often evoked in addressing the consonance between the spread of Pentecostalism and neoliberal capitalism²³—for Pentecostals the world is not a compromising setting from which to shy away. Instead, the world requires action and transformation, although this is full of difficulties and dangers. In this sense, Pentecostal cosmology is strongly oriented toward world making. Consumer items, as the prosperity gospel also stipulates, are an inalienable part of it. Commodities and gifts are far from bad per se, because their positive or negative nature entirely depends on the spirit that is supposed to be behind them. In principle, anything can be imbued with the Holy Spirit, and thus be a blessing in a born-again's life. This is what accounts for the close connection between the spread of capitalism, consumerism, and the appeal of the prosperity gospel. Pentecostalism embeds neoliberal economics.

Instead of using a normative lens to state how far the current African public sphere is (or is not) removed from Habermas's classical model, critical questions need to be asked. What is the relation between the constitution of new arenas for critical debate, entailing the cultivation and expression of new civic virtues, and the embracing of market structures by key public players? How do religious movements, in particular Pentecostal-charismatic churches, mediate between both? How do being a citizen, a Christian, and a consumer come together—or rub against each other—in the public display of a born-again identity? Which notion of citizenship underpins the concomitant promotion of development and engagement in faith-based organizations? How can we get beyond the Protestant ethic as the guiding template in assessing, or even judging, how Pentecostalism thrives in the interface of democratization and the market?

Religious Publics—From Abstraction to Embodiment

Over the past few years there has been a shift in understanding from the public sphere as disembodied—as a zone of rational debate and communicative interaction grounded in concepts—to a recognition of shared sentiments and tastes, based on appeals made to senses and emotions. This move has yielded more attention to the public sphere as a concrete arena or stage for appearance, as the saying that certain groups

are “going public” also implies.²⁴ The public sphere is in principle accessible to all citizens, and yet it is filled with signs and markers of separate (religious) identities. In Ghana’s capital, Accra, Pentecostal-charismatic churches excel in asserting their presence by spreading images, texts, and sounds throughout the public space of the city. Indeed, a Pentecostal church service not only addresses the church members and visitors who are present but also a broader audience outside that should hear and be touched by the message.²⁵ Powerful sound amplification systems are enveloped in a broader project of spreading the gospel by reaching the ears of even unbelievers, suggesting a remarkable alignment between media technologies and religion. In this volume, Barbara Cooper (chapter 4) also addresses the importance of using airwaves for the making of religious countercommunities—an observation that resonates with Charles Hirschkind’s work on sound and listening in creating an alternative public that is geared to expressing and achieving Islamic piety.²⁶ The act of expressing religious identity through sound waves is prone to raise conflicts. In Accra, year after year there have been fierce conflicts between Pentecostals and the traditional Ga, who require Christians to respect the taboo of noisemaking before the annual Homowo festival.²⁷ In such a conflict, sound is called upon in a broader struggle over the staging of identities, in which making “noise” or keeping “silent” become key issues of conflict. These issues are almost impossible to resolve for a formally secular state that has in the past been heavily involved with African heritage politics (sankofaism), yet increasingly realizes the need to acknowledge the power of Pentecostal constituencies.

With the rise of public religions, the public sphere has increasingly been recognized as forming a site for the expression of styles of identity and politics of belonging, in which the staging of particular (religious) identities, and modes of inclusion and exclusion, are hotly contested concerns.²⁸ Looking at how the public sphere operates in practice, it appears as a site of negotiation and struggle, in which different publics claim presence and power, making themselves visible and audible to others through specific aesthetic styles. The point is to explore actual processes and power structures in which publics are formed, so as to find out why and how certain publics become more present and powerful than others, generating tensions between dominant and counterpublics.

With regard to the Ghanaian setting, for instance, it is clear that Pentecostal pastors have been quite successful not only in conquering public space through images, texts, and sounds. They also contribute to

mobilizing a particular, new religious public that espouses a born-again personal identity and more and more successfully recasts the Ghanaian nation as a site of a spiritual battle between God and Satan. This attempt to envelop public culture with Christianity, by making skillful use of modern mass media, may well be described as a Pentecostalization of the public sphere. It occurs through a particular style of mobilization that is centered around new iconic figures of success and seeks to involve people by generating commitment. While some attention is being paid already to the various styles through which male pastors address and seek to bind their audiences,²⁹ it is high time, as Damaris Parsitau points out (chapter 6 of this volume), to also turn to female pastors who act as alternative figures of success, thereby questioning gender stereotypes and allowing for women's identification with public figures.

One intriguing aspect of current Pentecostal modes of public appearance is that personal, intimate, or secret matters move center stage, becoming prime matters to be made public. Far from being a merely personal affair, conversion implies that people are on the move and articulate their new identity to the outside world. Indeed, as James Pritchett puts it (chapter 1 of this volume), conversion signals the construction of, and membership in, a new public. The interconnection between public and personal is also relevant to understanding recent modes of exposing matters that would so far not have been found suitable for public consumption. In becoming a public force, Pentecostalism turns the personal into a matter of public concern.³⁰ Over the past years, in Ghana as in many other countries, many new radio programs have emerged, run by Christian (and often Pentecostal) hosts, that evolve around intimate and sexual matters.³¹ What hitherto remained concealed from public exposure and was assigned to the sphere of the intimate or secret (such as involvement with witchcraft, evil spirits, and so on) have become public issues—as scandals and public confessions of the love life of “fallen pastors,” their secret affiliations with occult forces, and the corrupting craze for wealth amply show. Independent cultural entrepreneurs also participate in this logic of uncovering, as with the Ghanaian and Nigerian popular video industry, which at least to some extent thrives on Christian modes of making public.³² Implying the transgression of older boundaries between public and personal, and the casting of intimate and secret matters as public themes, Pentecostal and other modes of going and making public require more attention in future research.

Pentecostal Media and a New Shared Style

Throughout Africa, the public sphere has become the site for the staging of new religious identities that stand in a more or less complicated relation to the state and to each other. Much has been written about the failure of postcolonial authoritarian African states to offer their citizens convincing national identities that command their commitment at the expense of ethnic or religious identities. This is the setting in which we need to situate the rise of new religious imagined communities that thrive through the accessibility and use of media and new technological infrastructures. Benedict Anderson has stressed the power of shared imaginations—materializing through language, symbols, and images, and communicated through media—to induce and affirm a sense of belonging.³³ In his perspective, “communities,” or publics, revolve around mediated imaginations that are able to transcend the (spatial) distance between members by generating a feeling of togetherness.

Studying the eager adoption of new—or better, newly accessible—media by Pentecostal-charismatic churches, scholars have pointed out that it makes sense to regard media not as foreign but intrinsic to religion. Once religion is understood as linking the realms of humans and spirits—as a practice of mediation—it makes no longer sense to posit a sharp distinction between religion and media.³⁴ Adopting a view of religion as mediating between humans and spirits raises intriguing new questions about the media use of public religions such as Pentecostal-charismatic churches. Investigating Pentecostal media use from this perspective, one notices a salient adoption of new media technologies into church services and Christian outreach. In the process, media are often naturalized and taken for granted or hailed as especially suitable technologies to convey a sense of divine presence. The point is that media are fully incorporated in religious communication among practitioners, and between them and God. Media such as the microphone, radio, television, films, or books are sanctified as suitable harbingers of divine power, without which it could not be transmitted. Thus, Pentecostals adopt and incorporate new technologies by authorizing them as vehicles of the Holy Spirit and thus as indispensable in the project of outreach.³⁵ At stake here is a confluence of media technologies and the spiritual realm that is to be reached through media—in this sense, God is located in the medium. The drive to use mass media in the religious project of spreading the gospel

Copyright © 2011, Ohio University Press. All rights reserved.

makes Pentecostalism a religion that swamps the public sphere with its texts, images, and sounds.

Indeed, as religious imagined communities depend on accessible infrastructures through which information circulates and is being shared, we need to take into account the concrete processes through which such communities come into being. Importantly, being part of a particular imagined community is not only a matter of the mind but of common structures of experience that mobilize commitment through a shared style.³⁶ Paying attention to style opens up a broader field of inquiry that alerts us to the importance of public appearance and modes of doing things without assigning them to mere outward and hence secondary matters. Inducing as well as expressing strong shared moods through a religious aesthetics, a religious style makes people feel at home. In a world of constant change, style offers some continuity and stability. Style is defined by a relationship between appearance, recognition, and identification. Expressing a distinct identity that is recognized by both those who associate with a style and who do not do so, style belongs to the public domain.

Thriving on repetition and serialization, style induces a mode of participation through the techniques of mimesis and emulation that yields a particular habitus. As Michel Maffesoli has argued, sharing images generates not only strong feelings of togetherness and speaks to, as well as mirrors, particular moods and sentiments, but it also forms people into a particular, common appearance.³⁷ Religious style, then, constitutes a particular kind of religious subjects who conceive of themselves and the divine in a particular way, employ particular mediation practices to access the realm of spirits, and constitute themselves through particular techniques of the self, modes of consumption, and practices of sharing united in the image of God.

Attention to style allows us as researchers to take seriously the actual appearance of religion—in the built environment, in mass-mediated audiovisual images, and in the bodies of religious practitioners—without reducing appearance to a mere outward expression. Taking into account the actual emphasis placed on appearance by religious people is a suitable point of entry into the approach to religion from a material, sensory angle. Significantly, it is commonly acknowledged that appearance is a prime concern for those participating in Pentecostal churches. A person's appearance—the type of clothes, the car, the house—is seen as the indication of an interior spiritual state. Since, in accordance with the

prosperity gospel, wealth is regarded as a sign of blessing from the Lord, much emphasis is placed on what might be viewed as “mere outward things” from a more orthodox Christian perspective. Of course, not all people attracted to these churches are healthy and rich, but the guiding idea is that participation may work in favor of this aim, by calling the Holy Spirit into the materiality of being. Participation works very much by sharing certain patterns of consumption and ways of doing and sensing things together, even if by sheer mimicry. In this way, people feel like somebody, although they may find it very difficult to bring their lives fully in line with the blessed state of the idealized born-again. In other words, as religious identities and communities materialize through style, style is of central importance in public religion and the public sphere.

The Cost of Public Appearance

Last but not least it needs to be pointed out that the emergence of new public spheres, and new possibilities of being in public and becoming a public, does not imply that all religions become public in the same manner. To turn to Ghana once again, there is a host of Pentecostal-charismatic megachurches that make sophisticated use of new media. With their language grounded in both the Bible and business, and their commercial, money-oriented outlook and theology, Pentecostal churches appear as successful mergers of church and business corporation, a point that is also often raised against these churches. Thus far, mainstream churches and Islamic groups, let alone traditional cults, have been somewhat reluctant to follow the Pentecostal example. It is not only a question of availability of funds but also a question of outlook. Though for different reasons, these religious groups were less prone to use the mass media so as to broadcast their messages to an anonymous mass audience.

Marleen de Witte has compared differences in attitudes toward media and mass mediation between representatives of the neotraditional Afrikania movement, on the one hand, and the International Central Gospel Church, run by Mensa Otabil, on the other.³⁸ Afrikania is heavily indebted to the state project of sankofaism that was central to state cultural policy in the period up to 1992. Dissatisfied with the current erosion of sankofaism and the perceived failure on the part of the state to bind citizens into this heritage project, Afrikania strives to strengthen traditional culture and religion. In the present public sphere, however,

Copyright © 2011, Ohio University Press. All rights reserved.

Afrikania is not very successful. Not only does Afrikania lack the funds to produce effective televised services, it also finds itself always already positioned as Christianity's Other, and thus equated with stereotypical views of traditional religion as the repository of the powers of darkness. It is virtually impossible to counter the Pentecostal symbolic violence vis-à-vis traditional religion by broadcasting alternative images. The main problem here is that the traditional priests associated with Afrikania are not eager to be visualized in front of television cameras.³⁹ We encounter here a "public performance of secrecy"⁴⁰ that asserts that African power owes its efficacy to being hidden from view. Hence Afrikania—all attempts to modernize and adapt to contemporary religious forms notwithstanding—occupies a quite marginal position in the public sphere. In analyzing a decisively public religion such as Pentecostalism, we need to place it in a broader religious field and assess how differences in access to media, as well as conventions of representation and appearance intrinsic to particular religious traditions influence the degree to, and the mode in which, religions actually go public.

In distinction to traditional cults, Pentecostal churches fully engage in what I call a public performance of revelation, striving to assert the reality of spiritual power through compelling mass-mediated images. What we encounter here is not a conservative, reverse move out of the system of mass media and information networks, as suggested by Manuel Castells.⁴¹ In his view, the adoption of modern mass media technologies into religion is supposed to ultimately destroy religion's legitimacy and its claims to point a way out of the system. I disagree with his claim that in this process "societies are finally and truly disenchanting because all wonders are on-line and can be combined into self-constructed image worlds."⁴² On the contrary, this type of church prides itself in being able to guide people right into such networks and to offer powerful symbols around which a community of born-again practitioners is being concentrated. This process, however, is inherently unstable, as church leaders lack the power to ultimately control the frequency and intensity with which audiences participate in the actual church or live up to the Christian moral standards. Opting for a mass organization and spreading out into the public sphere may easily come at the cost of what is lamented as watering down. This is not only a criticism made by historic churches against Pentecostal-charismatic megachurches, but also by now an often heard lamentation in Pentecostal circles themselves. Such worries express concerns about the ultimate impossibility of concentrating a Christian mass

audience into the organizational form of a church, a point also made by Ilana van Wyk (chapter 9 of this volume).

Congregating around the iconized image of the pastor, spectators form part of a new kind of community that is quite different from the congregational model that still organizes social relations among practitioners and church leaders in historic churches. The new kind of community excels by the marked contrast between the utmost control that the church leadership wields over the carefully designed images of the pastor-star and his ideal congregation, and its actual lack of control over the mass audience that attends services or watches the televised program. While editing can eliminate inappropriate forms of behavior and thus produce a perfect image, it is far more difficult to extend such forms of inclusion and exclusion to the world of the spectators. Binding them through a shared style requires much work and is potentially unstable.

OUR UNDERSTANDING of Pentecostalism as a public religion requires that we take seriously its material, tangible dimension. Ultimately, this calls for a revision of a still common view of religion as situated in opposition to matter, as if materiality and religion could belong to two entirely different spheres. In fact, we need not only to rethink the public sphere, taking leave of idealist, elitist, Eurocentric and all-too-abstract notions, but also to develop fresh approaches to religion in general, and Pentecostalism in particular. Rethinking the public sphere in our time requires rethinking religion, and vice versa.

Notes

1. Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
2. *Sankofa* (depicting a bird looking back, meaning “go back and take it”) is an Akan symbol that stands for the Ghanaian state project of cultural heritage.
3. Birgit Meyer, “Money, Power and Morality: Popular Ghanaian Cinema in the Fourth Republic,” *Ghana Studies* 4 (2001): 65–84; Meyer, “‘Praise the Lord’: Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana’s New Public Sphere,” *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 1 (2004): 92–110.
4. See, for example, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst, 2004).
5. A report published by the U.S. State Department states, “According to the 2000 government census, approximately 69 percent of the country’s population is Christian, 16 percent is Muslim, and 9 percent adheres to traditional indigenous religions or other

Copyright © 2011. Ohio University Press. All rights reserved.

religions. The Muslim community has protested these figures, asserting that the Muslim population is closer to 30 percent.” U.S. State Department, “Ghana: Religious Freedom Report,” 2002, http://atheism.about.com/library/irf/irfo3/blirf_ghana.htm. Within Christianity, Pentecostalism is a major force. Not only do Pentecostal-charismatic churches grow (both in numbers and the number of members), its emphasis on the Holy Spirit and fighting demons is also appealing to mainstream Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Catholicism, and Pentecostalism. See also Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*.

6. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

7. Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

8. Jürgen Habermas, “On the Relation Between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendietta (New York: Routledge, 2005): 327–38.

9. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

10. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

11. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

12. See also Hent de Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

13. See also Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 137.

14. These issues have emerged from the research program Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities, which I directed between 2000 and 2006 and which encompassed nine research projects on religion and the public sphere in West Africa, South Asia, Brazil, and the Caribbean. The key proposition of the initial program proposal was that the relationship between the postcolonial nation-state, media, and religion has been significantly reconfigured since the mid-1990s and has entailed the emergence of a new public sphere characterized by the blurring of neat, modernist distinctions between public and private, religion and politics, debate and entertainment. The main concern of the program, as formulated in the original proposal, was to chart the emergence of such new arenas in concrete locations on the basis of thorough empirical investigations and, at the same time, to question and rethink the rather normative Western concepts that are usually employed as analytical tools. Seeking to appreciate cultural particularities and yet to yield generalizable analyses, the program proposal made a plea for detailed historical and ethnographic exploration in the framework of a comparative perspective. For more information, see Modern Mass Media, Religion and the Imagination of Communities, Research Centre Religion and Society/Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, <http://www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion>.

15. David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

16. Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

17. Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

18. Birgit Meyer, “Religious Revelation, Secrecy, and the Limits of Visual Representation,” *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 4 (2006): 431–53.

19. Kofi Akosah-Sarpong in *Ghana News*, September 4, 2008.

20. Marleen de Witte, "Business of the Spirit: Ghanaian Broadcast Media and the Commercial Exploitation of Pentecostalism," paper presented at the European Council of African Studies Conference, Leipzig, 2009.

21. Birgit Meyer, "Pentecostal and Neo-liberal Capitalism: Faith, Prosperity and Vision in African Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 20, no. 2 (2007): 5–28.

22. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920).

23. For example, Peter Berger, "Max Weber Is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic Today," http://www.economyandsociety.org/events/Berger_paper.pdf; Sandy Johnston, *Under the Radar: Pentecostalism in South Africa and Its Potential Social and Economic Role* (Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2008).

24. Birgit Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding," in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. Meyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

25. Marleen de Witte, "Spirit Media: Charismatics, Traditionalists, and Mediation Practices in Ghana" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2008).

26. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

27. Rijk van Dijk, "Contesting Silence: The Ban on Drumming and the Musical Politics of Pentecostalism in Ghana," *Ghana Studies* 4 (2001): 31–64.

28. Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

29. De Witte, "Spirit Media."

30. The making public of private matters is a broader development. Politics in the West appears to be a field in which ever more is exposed about the private life of politicians. What is so interesting about the Ghanaian setting is the fact that it is not so much secular forces but Pentecostals who engage in casting private and secret matters into public concerns.

31. For example, Tilo Grätz, "Religious Radio Broadcasting in Benin," paper presented at the European Council of African Studies Conference, Leipzig, 2009.

32. Meyer, "Religious Revelation."

33. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

34. Hent de Vries, "In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies," in *Religion and Media*, ed. Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 4–42. See also Harri Englund, "Witchcraft and the Limits of Mass Mediation in Malawi," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007): 295–311; Jeremy Stolow, "Religion and/as Media," *Theory, Culture and Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 119–45; Meyer, "Imagined Communities."

35. Marleen de Witte, "Altar Media's *Living Word*: Televised Christianity in Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2003): 172–202; De Witte, "Spirit Media."

36. Meyer, "Praise the Lord"; Birgit Meyer, "Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics, and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion," in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 704–23.

37. Michel Maffesoli, *The Contemplation of the World: Figures of Community Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

38. Marleen de Witte, "The Spectacular and the Spirits: Charismatics and Neo-traditionalists on Ghanaian Television," *Material Religion* 1, no. 3 (2005): 314–35; De Witte, "Spirit Media."

Copyright © 2011. Ohio University Press. All rights reserved.

39. A recent intriguing exception is Kwaku Bonsam, a self-declared native priest and former Christian, who has since 2008 sought public appearance and the limelight of television to expose the hypocrisy of Pentecostal pastors.

40. Mattijs van de Port, "Priests and Stars: Candomblé, Celebrity Postscripts, Discourses, and the Authentication of Religious Authority in Bahia's Public Sphere," *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 1, nos. 2-3 (2005): 301-24.

41. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

42. *Ibid.*, 406.