



Max Weber Lecture Series

MWP - LS 2008/10

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EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE
MAX WEBER PROGRAMME

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Lecture Delivered 18 June 2008

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ISSN 1830-7736

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Printed in Italy
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

<http://www.eui.eu/>
<http://cadmus.eui.eu/>

Uncool Passion: Nietzsche Meets the Pentecostals

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These days, the sacred declares itself in ever more profane places. “Jesus is the answer,” proclaimed a crude, hand-painted sign beside the highway to Sun City, northwest of Johannesburg, where I recently traveled with a couple of colleagues. In unison, we quipped: “But what was the question?” The confident script seemed to suggest that we were missing the point, however. The force of the assertion was not merely to banish doubt; it was to *preempt* any question; to assert a mystery to end all puzzles, as it were (cf Gladwell 2007:44). Certainly, the message on the rock gestures towards a particular style of reasoning, toward the need to evoke our assent to its declaration of truth. In this, it presumes a certain mode of believing – and a particular sort of devotional self (Shapiro 1993:12) that many insist came into being with the modern world. This form of conviction, Thomas Blom Hansen (2007) has recently suggested, implies “the capacity to make decisions, and the capacity to *convince oneself* “and *be* convinced. Also, to *act decisively* in the service of abstract cause or principle. It is an orientation that remains dominant, Blom Hansen argues, across a range of different kinds of commitment in the current world – and there is plentiful evidence to support him, in Euro-America and beyond. The vernacular term for a person of conviction among Setswana speakers in South Africa, for instance, is *badumedi*, “one who voices agreement” – this reflecting the view of the 19th Century Protestant mission that genuine faith could only take root in deliberating, reflective, speaking subjects. Tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions about the sacred were treated as unreflective superstition (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:66). Converts had to *choose* faith, and to continuously reiterate the sincerity of their conviction both in words (Keane 2007) and in deeds.

But there is another idiom of piety – one with perhaps an even older legacy – that asserts itself ever more forcibly in our times. It is one that seems to overwhelm the rational subject unbidden, as it were, convicting through the sheer force of its

ineffability: like the manifestation of the Virgin Mary in April, 2005 in downtown Chicago, which appeared on the wall of an underpass on one of the city's busiest thoroughfares.¹ Soon hundreds of people gathered, wreathing the image with flowers and votive candles. For such a demure figure, she drew forth a surprising passionate public response. Nocturnal skeptics, seemingly enraged by her arresting power, scrawled a counter assertion – “Big Lie” – across her sepia visage,² and the city fathers then ordered the whole expanse to be doused in plain brown paint. Yet, lo and behold, a day later, the divine features appeared again, their uncanny outlines etched clearly on the bluff surround – a graphic assertion of a wondrous presence that for many was a truth beyond argument. Autonomous apparitions of this sort are hardly unprecedented, of course, especially in Catholic contexts. Until recently, such humdrum miracles and effusive declarations of popular piety have been less common a feature of mainstream public culture in predominantly Protestant contexts. Yet the clash of images on the underpass makes evident an ever more strident struggle between argument and revelation, between contrasting modes of conviction that should both be taken as inherent features of modernist ontology, each being the conditions of the other's possibility. The cool passion of the deliberative, Kantian self or the Weberian rational ascetic is understood, after all, as a triumph over “terrible” ecstasy (Weber 2001:89), just as modernist ideas of rational agency are widely perceived as being fueled by the sublimation of emotional excess. The dialectic at work here may be ongoing and never fully resolvable – hence the enduring challenge of snatching virtue from temptation. But it has been widely argued that, under conditions of Eurocentric high modernity, a culture of cool passion prevailed, giving form to a dominant model of personhood, both sacred and secular – even if a longing for the white heat of miracles remains the suppressed underside of this disposition.

There seems to be evidence, however that, in recent decades the hegemony of this rationalist ideology has been disturbed; that appeal to the role of a more unsettling kind of fervor is detectable in many places where we live and work. Along with this has gone a series of shifts in scholarly orientation: a tendency to argue for the original, redemptive force of affect in human existence. What is more: many social theorists have become ever more enchanted with the idea of the theological itself, and have shown a readiness to link it, through hyphenation, to once stolidly secular constructs – like the “political” or the “legal” (hence the fashionable return of “political-theology,” “theolegality” and the like (Comaroff and Comaroff n.d.). But why is this happening at this particular juncture if – as many social theorists have argued – entities like the modern state and liberal politics have *never* really been disenchanting? And what do we make of the strange echoes of this rediscovery of the power of emotional fervor in more literal – some would say, “fundamentalist” – calls to reunite God and government?

At the very least, the two events I have described here alert us to the pervasive presence of appeals both to ethical and religious realism in many urbane contexts where it has long been more peripheral. Here, I draw my observations chiefly from two cultural locales I inhabit simultaneously – that of South Africa and the USA. On the face of it, it would seem that in a world ever more overtly committed to maximizing choice and calculation, we are at the same time experiencing an assertive contrary strain

¹ “Virgin Mary’ on US motorway wall,” BBC News: *World Edition*, 21 April, 2005 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4468275.stm>).

² “‘Vision of the Virgin’ vandalised,” BBC News: *World Edition*, 7 May, 2005 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4524057.stm>).

– a vision of commitment as a willing surrender of self to authoritative truths and authoritarian truth tellers, to fateful fervor, to ethical commitments that take possession of the possessor, compelling action by a subject who is at once more and less than a self-willed agent. At the very least, then, our current moment is one of heightened paradox, at once radically deregulated, yet very hospitable to assertions of authoritarian sovereignty; sapped of political will, yet rife with sacral callings and sacrificial acts. It is an age bereft of myth (Jean-Luc Nancy [1997:5] talks of “the end of the world of sense”) yet it is also an era unusually susceptible to redemptive narratives, sublime intimations, absolutist commitments of one kind and another.

It is a time both of deconstruction, and passionate conviction. True, the language of faith reborn does root itself, in many places in textual practices of argument and persuasion (this is apparent, for instance, in the rise across the world of Islamic or Vedic reading groups, and the burgeoning of small-group Bible study or Haredi Talmud circles). But faith also seems to announce itself ever more publicly in the voice of revelation, ardor, a compulsion that exceeds reasoned understanding (note here the renewed appeal of Freud in much current scholarly writing on religious phenomena that goes along with a renewed fascination with the force of affect). In fact it is arguable that a discourse of submission to sacred authority, of relinquishing self-determination to mysterious will and passion – ever more evident in many forms of born-again conviction – subverts the ideology of rational, free choice, and the image of the reflective, selective subject that is central to liberal understandings of principled belief. This seeming rejection of the cool passion of modern reason is often accompanied by other kinds of divergence from post-enlightenment assumptions about humanist knowing and being: like an axiomatic commitment to some idea of the secular as the neutral meeting-ground of universal existence and truth, the empty space-time of common human agency and history making; or the acceptance of the “social” as the *deus ex machina* of existence in the world, individual and collective.

Theologies of Affect

I will suggest that, while these features are evident in most intense form in the context of revitalized faiths, they have counterparts in other places – not least, as I have been intimating, in the preoccupations of certain sorts of scholarship in the human sciences. Theoretically adroit theologians like John Milbank (200X:2) argue that the impact of late modern Nietzschean critique has been to significantly unsettle the claims both of mainstream sociology and the Marxist-Hegelian tradition. Perhaps, although the interest for me is less in the putative effects of post-structuralist scholarship than in the ways in which it displays a sensibility unexpectedly akin to the conviction characteristic of certain faiths, like Pentecostalism. And this, in turn, suggests that we scholars are caught up in more thoroughgoing realignments of the ontological architecture – the modes of producing and transacting truth – that configure our lived worlds. Certainly, a shift from social to metaphysical reason is widely apparent in many parts of our universe. From the US to Uganda, Britain to Bosnia, civic life has been pervaded by a rhetoric of ethical impulsion, an embrace of faith-based initiatives. Governments resort ever more readily to the language of virtue and sentiment rather than social engineering; they are ever more ready to proclaim wars against evil, to announce campaigns of moral regeneration and foster models of ethical citizenship. And all this attests to the concern with theologico-politics that I have remarked, to issues that preoccupied crusading 17th

century rationalists like Spinoza (1670), and that are once again a force to be conjured with in our own times. Scholars and statesmen alike seek to ground a rhetoric of collective action in discourses of rectitude and sentiments of empathy – edging aside the language of social determination, state-centered rationality. Hence the overwhelming appeal, across the political spectrum, of anti-liberal writers like Carl Schmitt – who rejected what he termed “liberal normativism” for the rediscovery of a politics vested in the exception, the strange, the miraculous, the magical; for a return of the force of “non-rational” transcendence to the bloodless world of Weberian bureaucracy (Schmitt (1985:xx).

Returned, too, is the language of early liberalism, the ethos of the Scottish enlightenment that preceded the triumph of sociological thought in the manner of Comte, Durkheim or Keynes; vide all the talk of civil society, of a market tempered less by social reason or state mediation than by the consequences of an interpersonal empathy; of “community” as an aggregate or commonweal born not of collective understanding or norms as irreducible social facts, but from a myriad individual transactions and contracts. Contemporary Western Europe, some observers claim, has seen the rise of an assertively ethical discourse of citizenship and a notable expansion of quasi-religious idioms of “service” in public life. Observing shifts in the nature of the European welfare state under current conditions, Andrea Muehlebach (2007:34) suggests that “the culture of neo-liberalism is, in some parts of the world, undergoing a process one might call a “Catholicization” – by which she means an embrace of an ethic of simultaneous voluntarism and duty, of people (rather than the heartless state) caring for each other and building the collective good. The aim, here, is to flood the public sphere with what were formerly seen as properly “private” qualities: fellow-feeling, sentimentality, empathy. All this signals a shift from the division of institutional and affective labor – the clear divides between secular and sacred, public and private – captured in signal modernist accounts, like the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (one might note that one key personification of ethical liberalism in Europe, Tony Blair, converted to Catholicism as soon as he left public office). While this contrasts in many ways with the expanding “neo-Pentecostalism” that is taking on the role of care and social reproduction in many other parts of the planet, the doctrine of ethical citizenship expresses a similar “anti-modernist” strain, a discomfort with secular notions of society, politics and morally-neutral public life, a desire to erase the line between the metaphysical and the mundane. In so-called “Third Way” Europe, policies of “ethical citizenship” seek to create communities of mutual care through public-private sector partnerships (Muehlebach 2007:33); in the megachurches of the American or South African exburbs, we shall see, the aim is to encompass social and moral reproduction *within* the arc of faith.

If Adam Smith’s theory of moral sentiments was born of his fear of the prospect of markets without affect, the recent turn to ethics in our reborn liberal age connotes a similar urge to temper the savage force of *laissez faire* as the primary agent of world-making (think of recent movements that espouse enlightened enterprise as the engine of ethical social construction; Corporate Social Responsibility, micro-financing, and the like). This resonance with an earlier capitalist age alerts us to clear shifts in the institutional anatomy of high secular modernity. Radically liberalized business is ever more overtly identified with religious motives in many places. In fact, some evangelical leaders in the US and elsewhere have revived the notion of Christian political economy (cf Norman 1976:41), a phrase that excited civic fathers in early 19th Britain, and that

rides again in ever more spirited effort to imbue the market with redemptive force. Hence the mass-merchandised hamburgers wrapped in biblical homilies, the Starbuck's preachers³, the Christian banks, Godly HMO's, and pyramid schemes; or the blockbuster Hollywood action films that wed the sensuous melodrama of the video-game to the Passion of Christ. Hence, also, enterprises like the *Lord's Gym*,⁴ a US fitness franchise that promises to build body and soul in a "safe," "properly Christian atmosphere" (Schippert 2003; Comaroff 2006); its logo is a pumped-up Jesus, doing push-ups beneath the weight of a huge cross, under the message, "His Pain Your Gain" (Its website advertises workout clothes with a pre-millennial cast: "Warm up for the Big Event" in a "powerful witnessing shirt; sizes [from petite] to 3XL").⁵ This is 19th C muscular Christianity born again, in eroticized commodity form.⁴ The aim is to turn you on – to the Passion of the Savior.⁶ In an era of increasingly deregulated faith, no instrument is too profane to act as a vehicle of salvation – as was evident in a recent *Larry King Live* discussion with a group of ardent female evangelists who claimed to work the streets of a Colorado town, "flirting for Jesus."

The Erotics of Faith

In many respects, little of this is new – neither the muscular Christianity nor the faith fueled by sensual incitement: E.P Thompson's pithead preachers trod a fine line between ardor and discipline, flesh, and spirit. There are many predecessors for the recent array of publicly-disgraced US pastors – the Hagged Swaggarts and the Swaggarig Haggards – convicted in a double sense by the very sexual transgression against which they have mounted their spirited moral crusades. These primetime falls-from-grace make plain the degree to which erotic depravity serves as the underside or "supplement" (to use Žižek's⁷ terms) of militant Pentecostal sanctity. They also remind us that the pleasures of market-inflected, hyper-mediated faith lie as much in the spectacle of insatiable desire, excess, and human fallibility as in passion virtuously deployed. A complex dialectic is in play here – a productive interplay between the "profane" and the "sublime" that is probably a dimension of all forms of charismatic power (cf. Blom Hansen: 2001:130). The melodramatic humiliations of recent US televangelicals testify, too, to the scopic voyeurism of mass mediated spiritual ecstasy, the ever more delirious oscillation of fall and redemption, erotic and spiritual desire. All this suggests the need to amplify our understanding of the dynamics of passion and conviction at work in late modern, mass-mediated faith; also, to resist too easy an opposition of theological reason and the language of immoderate appetite.

I shall return to the matter of mass-mediated passion in a moment. But once again, let me reiterate that the interplay of Godly and carnal desire it manifests is hardly

³ "How Breweth Java With Jesus," Damien Cave, *The New York Times*, October 23, 2005, Week in Review, p.4.

⁴ *Lord's Gym* website (<http://www.lordsgym.org/page/page/4282989.htm>), accessed 20 May, 2007.

⁵ The Most Powerful Witnessing Shirt in the History of Christian Apparel (www.livingepistles.com/items/authentic-lord~39-s-gym/list.htm), accessed 20 May, 2007.

⁶ See also evangelical discussions of sexuality-as-godliness such as *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love*, a best seller first published in 1976 by Tim and Beverly LaHaye; cf. Linda Kintz, 1997, *Between Jesus and the Market: the Emotions that Matter in Right Wing America*. William (n.d.:28) has gone so far as to speak of the "Christian-family-eroticism" formula in the contemporary US.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, "With our Without Passion, Part 1: What's Wrong with Fundamentalism," 13 November, 2005, *Lacan.com* (<http://www.lacan.com.zizpassion.html>).

new to our times. It has been there from the start: “Jesus taught both in the temple and the marketplace,” notes best-selling evangelical Pastor Rick Warren, whose homilies have graced Starbucks Styrofoam coffee-cups.⁸ In the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber (2001:119) italicizes a passage from John Wesley: “*We must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich.*” Emblematic evangelists like David Livingstone carried copies of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* to the mission field, along with the bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Within Europe and beyond, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam have all engaged in continuing, locally-situated engagements with the spirit of capitalism. And this interplay is constantly evolving: The Roman Catholic Church recently provided a neat example: at the present time, some North American and European churches send Mass intentions, requests for prayers to remember the dead, to clergy in Kerala, India by email, where they are performed by priests at about one-third of the cost in the West. This divine outsourcing was condemned by a spokesman of the British union, *Amicus*: “It shows that no aspect of life in the West is sacred,” he chided.⁹ But the truth is perhaps the reverse: these days, the most urbane activities can be recuperated in the service of the divine.

Neither does all this traffic imply a simple increase in religious observance across the planet: recent US surveys suggest that, despite heightened evangelical activity, the numbers of those who profess no faith at all are also on the rise.¹⁰ We may well be in the midst of yet another religious revival – Robert Fogel (2000) calls it the Fourth Great Awakening – but such revitalizations have recurred repeatedly over the centuries, within world religions and beyond. Nor is it even an matter of religion simply having “gone public” in unprecedented ways, as asserted at a recent emergency session of the American Humanist Association, its members alarmed at increasingly explicit efforts across the US to “return God to the public square.”¹¹ To repeat, in some respects, modernity never really *was* disenchanted in any thoroughgoing sense. The likes of Schmitt (1985:36) have long insisted that the central tenets of modern political theory are “secularized theological concepts;” John Milbank (2006:3) calls social theory “theologies or anti-theologies in disguise.” Yet at the same time, as Talal Asad (2003:5) insists, the drawing of a line between the sacred and the secular, faith and reason has been an essential feature of the ideological hegemony of modern liberal nation-states. And at present, there is a growing inclination – both scholarly and popular, in the West and beyond – to call this line into question, to query the claims of secular liberalism (think of the fall-out of the French and British head-scarf affairs; or the rise in many places, from Nigeria to Indonesia, of campaigns for state recognition of religious law; or the contentious suggestion by the Archbishop of Canterbury that *shari’ah* be deemed appropriate for the governance of British Muslim communities)¹². Rancière (1999:113)

⁸ “How Breweth Java With Jesus,” Damien Cave, *The New York Times*, October 23, 2005, Week in Review, p.4.

⁹ “Short on Priests, U.S. Catholics Outsource Prayers to Indian Clergy,” Saritha Rai, June 13, 2004, *NYTimes.com* <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C02EFDB1330F930A25755C0A9629C8B63>

¹⁰ “Survey Indicates More Americans “Without Faith,” *American Atheist*, November 22, 2001 (<http://www.athiests.org/flas.line/athiest4.htm>) 10/9/05.

¹¹ “Why Bush Threatens Secularism,” Julia Duin, *The Washington Times*, 14 April 2005 (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/national/200504-124744-9798r.htm>).

¹² See ‘Carey Weighs into Sharia Law Row,’ *BBC News*, 10 February 2008; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7236849.stm; accessed 14 March 2008.

remarks that many of modernity's dark secrets are increasingly – in our present time – made flagrantly evident in the plain light of day. Scholarly calls to recognize modern politics as ‘always already enchanted’ are part of this process. But as I have noted, these scholars have ever more striking counterparts in an array of religious spokesmen; like prolific Premillennialist Pentecostal writer Tim LaHaye, for instance, who wages explicit war on what they term the “conspiracy of secular humanism” (LaHaye and Noebel 2000).

Indeed, theological critics of modernity (whether philosophical or more prosaic) are increasingly strident in attacking the limits of humanism: be it the conceits of liberal democracy or Darwinism, Leninism or *laïcité*, historicism or relativism, secular ontologies are being seen as repressive ideologies in many places, and are being challenged to defend their claim to transparent, disinterested truth. Here, it is not merely fundamentalists who call the question. A vibrant, “radical orthodox,” anti-modernist strain has been identified in current European Anglo-Catholicism, replacing an older, cooler deism in terms of which, if God was not dead, he had certainly left his human creatures pretty much to their own providential devices. Now no less a figure than Pope Benedict XVI has launched a fervent crusade against what he terms the world-wide “dictatorship of relativism,”¹³ relativism being the Babel of humanist hubris, the vanity of life and judgment beyond the sovereignty of God's law. There is no recognition, here, of the authority of social norms, or the existence of systematic cultural values; just a Hobbesian world of moral solipsism and unregulated interest. A strong anti-humanist suspicion of philosophical argument or historical reason – and of the Hegelian ethic of social responsibility – is shared by foundational belief across a range of creeds. It links the form, if not the content, of their convictions to those of other opponents of liberal humanism, from political neo-conservatives to game theorists and market fundamentalists. They, too, fetishize choice, yet simultaneously reduce choice to a commitment to a priori formulae; they are likewise given to declaring an end to history and a distrust of hermeneutics. And they also share the aim of reducing semantic slippage and interpretive distortion in the interest of plain, honest realism that claims to make transparent the relation between signs and their referents. The tendency to pit such modes of reasoning against the “heresy” of liberal relativism has a great deal to teach us about some of the ways in which modernity is being reconfigured in a world that many now term ‘post-human,’ even ‘post-social’ (Hayles 1999).

Remaking Modernity

These passionate convictions also drive acts of world-making. An impetus to reform the institutional arrangements that embodied secular modernity is very evident in a wide range of faith-based movements in the current moment. Many Pentecostal initiatives, as I have stressed, seek to reclaim the profane world as a space of the miraculous (i.e. to see the happenings of everyday life as a consequence of the direct engagement on an instrumental Spirit, a vision very differently from, say, Hegel's idea of the “divine predicate” of universal human reason). Birgit Meyer has argued (2006:11) that such revitalized faiths endanger their overall enterprise by seeking a mode of “being in the world” that risks becoming indistinguishable from “being of the

¹³ “My heroes are driven by God, but I'm glad my society isn't” George Monbiot, *The Guardian*, October 11, 2005, p.31.

world.” But it seem to me that making things indistinguishable in this way is central to their mission: “We want the church to look like a [shopping] mall,” insists Pastor Lee McFarland of the Radiant megachurch in the expansive community of Surprise about 45 minutes northwest of Phoenix, Arizona. “We want you to come in and say, ‘Dude, where’s the cinema’?” (Mahler 2005:33). The now fallen Pastor Ted Haggard, known for preaching not with a Bible, but with a PalmPilot in hand (Sharlet 2005:45) titled his best-selling book *Dog Training, Fly Fishing, & Sharing Christ in the 21st Century*. Alas, he was subsequently found sharing the gospel with a gay sex-worker of precisely the sort he was famous for denouncing; hence his spectacular fall from grace.

As this suggests, emissaries of revitalized faith seem ever more intent on taking possession of what were formerly (relatively) separate domains of politics, the law, the market, popular culture, the secular media – this with the aim of appropriating their *modus operandi* as implements of God’s design, their signs as indices of one ineffable truth. Commitment here, means opting for Christianity as lifestyle: reborn faiths aspire to become theocracies (in the manner of Weber), offering employment and business opportunities, education, athletic facilities, ritual and therapeutic care. Megachurches of this sort are not limited to the US; evangelical Pentecostalism is held to attract almost 20 million new members a year worldwide, having emerged as the major competitor of a Catholicism that is itself becoming markedly more charismatic (Nixon 2003). Ted Haggard’s church has direct mission offshoots in several parts of Africa, for example, including in the North West province of South Africa where I have long done fieldwork. While few congregations in Africa match the elaboration of the theocracies of the US Western frontier, expansive, multiplex movements are common in many parts of the continent in current times. They offer everything from security services and mail delivery to schooling and AIDS outreach, their robust institutional growth contrasting sharply with the erosion of other civic organizations under conditions of liberalization and state contraction. Among the so-called “neo-Pentecostals,” who stress the prosperity-gospel, the language of patient labor is eclipsed by invocation of the market as *deus ex machina*. Echoes here of current American evangelicalism, which William Connolly (n.d.:33) describes as a striving to “bind capitalist creativity to the creativity of God himself.”

Certainly, the leaders of such groups frequently hail their members as full-blooded, desiring beings in a formula that tends to resolve an older Protestant ambivalence about this-worldly gratification by endorsing wholesome consumption and righteous (i.e. monogamous) passion (see Connolly [n.d.:28] on “Christian-family eroticism”). But notable, too, is the frequency with which the Faustian embrace of appetite comes apart in its own excess, how its avatars are caught by the very antinomian enemies – the devils and witches – against which they define their virtue. (Those who sign on to the prosperity gospel in the parts of rural South Africa are said to be issued with satanic credit cards that register no debt. In an unwitting parody of Adam Smith, it is claimed that prosperous storekeepers hide human hands beneath the thresholds of their businesses). Too literal an embrace of miraculous commerce can also come undone (witness, here, the Pentecostal penchant, in the US and Africa alike, to spawn explosive pyramid schemes; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). But all this animates further passion plays of fallibility, and intensified cycles of repentance and rebirth.

Feeling the Heat: The rising temperature of public passion

Let us return, for a moment, to the Madonna of the motorway, and the strong public sentiment she evoked. In Southern Africa, too, a noticeable component of contemporary religious conviction across the social spectrum involves highly theatrical manifestations of feeling; often – in more charismatic movements – it involves the demonstration of a self overwhelmed by the power of the spirit. In the case of older Protestant denominations, this tendency transgressed the dominant emotional economy of cool deism, of affect as the stuff that made possible the enactment of control, direction, grace. In its secular version, Durkheim and his followers famously saw such affect as pre-social, embodied vitality (Victor Turner's [1967: 54] "orectic pole" of the symbol) that – through the alchemy of ritual – made the obligatory desirable. In the early nineteenth-century African mission field, the passionate, carnal sensibility that was seen to characterize the primitive also provided an opening for the moving power of God. Nonconformist evangelists spoke of God's Word as calling forth tears that could "wash away all the red paint" of heathenism from their bodies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:214). But while they actively courted such emotionalism, they also labored hard to develop a private, reflective self, a religious conscience that internalized the struggle between flesh and spirit. Outbursts of public emotion among those who had committed themselves to the civilizing mission were read as signs of immature faith, of an absence of rational self-possession. A regime of sensory surveillance was installed by the gatekeepers of Protestant propriety in order to suppress the signs of unmediated savage ardor. Yet pious sublimation presumed incitement as its necessary supplement: the ever-present danger of backsliding into primitive promiscuity, magic, satanic desire.

The Neo-Pentecostal churches that are expanding at the expense of mainstream Christian denominations in many parts of the African continent at present operate with a strikingly different economy of affect from this modernist mission orthodoxy: not only do they encourage outbursts of enthusiasm as testimony to a radical invasion by the spirit; they express distrust of modes of piety and public action that lack animating fervor. In this, they resonate with more urbane sentiment in this society and beyond: an increasingly palpable sense that secular liberalism "lacks authenticity because it lacks passion."¹⁴ This returns me to my earlier more general remarks about the evidence of a growing appeal to "non-rational" forces over entropic social reason and alienation; evidence here of the appeal of a rhetoric of moral rearmament and ethical citizenship that aims to flood a dispassionate public sphere with sentimentally-fueled fellow feeling (Muehelebach n.d.). This returns us, too, to the current hankering for transcendent imperatives, for a theologico-politics that can inspire a bloodless world with sublime conviction.

Yet again, none of this is unprecedented. William Mazzarella (n.d.) is right to note that most visions of modernity have implied a notion of affective deficit. As I have been suggesting, there does seem to be an explicit perception at present that passion is a scarce resource, serving as a unique, sought-after idiom of truth unclouded by rationalization. This is evident in a range of different sorts of discursive registers, in religious life and beyond. Many observers in the US and UK have noted the current "obsession" with the performance of sincerity or transparency in public life: the demand that political figures show integrity and empathy ("feel your pain"). What David Runciman terms the mass-mediated "politics of self-revelation"¹⁴ seems now more

¹⁴ Behind the Masks," David Runciman, *The Guardian*, 17 May, 2008, Review, p.4.

important in public culture than issue-based argument, more palatable than the challenging compromises and in-situ judgments required by democracy-in-action. As both ideology and politics have increasingly been devalued as mere interested calculation, affect becomes evidence of a forthright relation between heart and deed; the truth or fakery of expressions of feeling become more significant than debate about content or policy. This quality is evident, too, in the enactment of religious commitments. At least in the South African churches I know best, there has been a marked move (most striking in the more charismatic faiths, but relayed across a broad spectrum beyond) to turn up the expressive heat; to publicly perform a kind of conviction that Weber (2001:82) termed “hysterical;” faith than seems to overwhelm reason, strategy, personal interest to flood the self with divine compulsion. “Even the Lord Jesus Christ needed the Holy Spirit to live on earth,” says a recent Sunday handout from the *Universal Church of the Kingdom of God*¹⁵ in central Cape Town. The “Spirit – like a driver – drives you to his Kingdom” (this in a context where cars embody personal agency *par excellence*, and altars in churches of this denomination are often adorned with BMW advertisements). Not only does this discourse presume a yearning for sovereignty (and I note in passing the widespread nostalgia for father-figures, the appeal of authoritarian populism more generally in contemporary South Africa, and in other “post-totalitarian contexts”¹⁶). The cult of affect at work here parallels closely that advanced by sophisticated, Deleuzian theorists like Brian Massumi (2002), who speaks of affect (after Spinoza) as an embodied state that while it “has affects,” is also “open[ed] up to being affected.” Affect, says Massumi, is our “angle of participating in processes larger than ourselves,” having a “directness that..isn’t necessarily self-possession.”¹⁷ Massumi insists that in contrast to emotion (a more limited, symbolically-shaped, subjective feeling) affect “needs no concept of mediation.” Enabling one to be captured from without, affect is increasingly summoned in the idiom of mass-marketed consumer desire, becoming the prime vehicle of subject-formation everywhere. This process works, Massumi insists, through contagion rather than persuasion, edging aside rational choice as a means of enrolling subjects to its cause. This resonates with the logic of purifying passion, espoused by those who advance Christianity as life-style.

One is reminded here of Scottish Enlightenment figures like Smith and Hume, who took moral sentiment to be more fundamental than reason (Muehlebach n.d.:56). Even more, perhaps, one senses a kinship with early modern humoral understandings of “passion” as arousal, evoked by the direct action of external forces on the corporeal self (Hirschman 1977), a conception rather different from later understandings of “emotion” as a privatized, psycho-dynamic feeling.

Critics have disputed Massumi’s commitment to the idea that affect – because it defies mediation – offers an escape from the determinations of language and culture (Mazzarella n.d.), and I am largely in agreement with them. But again, what interests me here is the considerable resonance between Massumi’s approach, and popular

¹⁵ This church, a branch of the prolific and much discussed *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* Brazil, has flourished in Southern Africa in the past couple of decades (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002; Kramer 1999).

¹⁶ I think, here, of the theatrical invocations of masculine paternalism enacted by ex-deputy president Jacob Zuma and his supporters at the time of his rape trial in 2006 (Motesei 2007); or the hugely popular Afrikaans song and video that in 2006 called upon a deceased Boer War general (de la Rey) to return to deliver his people from their current rudderless plight.

¹⁷ “Interview with Brian Massumi,” Mary Zournazi, www.theport.tv/wp/pdf/pdf1.pdf, accessed 10 May, 2007.

understandings of affect in the culture of movements like those of African Pentecostalism. For many such Pentecostals likewise see passion as incarnate power and potential, being a force that evades dissipation and corruption because it is unmediated by conscious manipulation or control. For charismatics, of course, such putatively unmediated affect is a manifestation of God, not of embodied human being. But the parallels resonate with Milbank's (2006:2) observation of the unwitting agreement of theology and post-structuralist critique on the importance of the mythic and the transcendent in human action. Charismatics strive, as have many believers before them, to recapture an original unity with God that is not merely seamless, but that actually dispenses with mediation or semiotic intervention of any kind.

The divine can only be known by way of mediation, of course. As Mazarella (n.d.:16), Warner (2002) and others note, the "fiction of premediated existence" derives precisely from this fact. What is more, to the degree to which they disguise their own role as go-betweens in the production of divine intimacy, media often present themselves as the "hot lines" to power. Many Pentecostals show an obsession with cutting-edge communications: hence their appellation as "electronic churches" (churches "with kereoke and powerpoint"),¹⁸ where sound-systems sometimes replace altars, and mass-mediation becomes integral to the nature of conviction and the apprehension of the divine (witness talk about "downloading Jesus in one's life"). In a recent sermon in *The Universal Church* in Cape Town, the preacher declared, "When the film credits roll at the end of your life, they will not acknowledge the South African government; they will thank us at the Universal Church." Such mass media have taken advantage of state deregulation in many countries to massively expand the circulation of devotional images and dispensations, thereby creating novel subjects and publics (Hackett n.d.). In Africa, the means of communication in general are increasingly under the control of faith-based corporations. Denominational groups conduct a growing proportion of broadcast business on the continent, from paid religious programming to the production of Pentecostal video-cassettes, gospel CDs, and tapes transmitting the *baraka* of sheikhs (Soares 2004).

As several scholars have argued (Meyer 2004) devout vernaculars are also colonizing the ground of urbane popular representation, especially (but not exclusively) in the prodigious West Africa straight-to-video industry. Current media of the miraculous in Africa apply the diverse possibilities of filmic fantasy to create a realist sublime – a mobilization of what Kracauer (1960:83) called the superior capacity of film to "render visible things that have been imagined." And here, as in many charismatic movements elsewhere, we see how an expansive, impassioned faith occults the sources of its own circulation, dispensing with concerns about sacred/secular divides. While its subject-matter runs the gamut from crime and football dramas to witchcraft-horror, charismatic movies have become integral to the manner in which the spirit stages itself in much of Pentecostal Africa. More than this: personal film and video draw ever more avidly on the same cinematic tropes to record the drama of the Spirit's work in the world (the nationally feted South African carver, Johannes

¹⁸ See Dennis A. Smith, "Eine Bewegung jenseits der Modernität in Lateinamerika," *The World Association of Christian Communication*, 13 August, 2004 (www.wacc.org.uk/de/publications/media_development/2005_2/moving_beyond_modernity_in_latin_america). I first heard references to churches with "kereoke and powerpoint" (made in respect of Southern Baptist churches) in the US; subsequently, the phrase has also been voiced in respect of South African Pentecostal worship.

Segogelo, is perhaps best known for one iconic figure, repeated again and again: a recording angel, in white cassock, looking at ordinary, every-men and women through the lens of a videocamera; plate 1). As has been noted of Brazil, the airing of glossy, camera-ready spectacles on high-tech religious channels makes an impact on local understandings of ritual. African funerals and healing rites, for instance, are being remade in the tropes of televangelical drama;¹⁹ Kracauer (in Hansen (1999:70) remarked that cinematic expression plays in visceral ways with the paradoxes and limits of modern realism: “in a flash” he noted, it passes from the objective to the subjective, and simultaneously evokes the concrete and the abstract.” For example, the genre of slapstick, with its well-choreographed orgies of demolition, both invokes and inverts the capitalist-modern relation of people to things.



Plate 1

Similar sorts of claims can be made for the burgeoning cinema of the late-modern miraculous in Africa, where the surreal capacities of film become synonymous with the power of the Spirit to dissolve and reform the mundane world. Birgit Meyer (2006:11) invokes Derrida, in pondering whether one needs to believe in an age of such visual verisimilitude – though I would add that “seeing” the divine in the banal always presumes an *a priori* faith; also, it requires a sense of an invisible absence that exceeds presence. Indeed, in saturating the lived world with the miraculous, these pious vernaculars parallel other more embracing structural shifts that challenge the place of disenchantment in the world, striving to return that world to the kind of unremarked,

¹⁹ See Dennis A. Smith, “Eine Bewegung jenseits der Modernität in Lateinamerika,” *The World Association of Christian Communication*, 13 August, 2004 (www.wacc.org.uk/de/publications/media_development/2005_2/moving_beyond_modernity_in_latina_merica).

doxic commitment, to the “primitive” religious sensibility, that so unsettled missionary modernists.

These efforts can never fully prevail, of course, and the wider universe that contains them remains heterodox, preserving the need to perform and prove the commitment of faith. The very assertion of belief is simultaneously a reinforcement of the existence of doubt. Is this not, at the end of the day, just another instance of the fact that while modernity seems to be changing, it remains essentially the same?²⁰

Conclusions – Uncool and otherwise

Weber argued that the Protestant Ethic had sanctified the maximizing ethos of early industrial society and nurtured cultural and subjective orientations that ensured that it flourished. Are we not just witnessing a later chapter in the same long story of the elective affinity between evangelicalism and capitalism?

Yes, and no. The historical relationship of Protestantism to capitalism is both less privileged, and more complex than Weber allowed. For one thing, his longer-term telos has not been born out; the prediction that capitalism would develop a secular autonomy, free of the need for Godly reinforcement, has proved wrong. It is evident that there has been a more intrinsic, dialectical connection between capitalism and various strains of Protestantism (not to mention Catholicism and Judaism) than he acknowledged. All contributed to the contingent mix that congealed as industrial capitalism in its various instantiations, and all were drawn into relationship with the novel media of communication, the expanding commodification, the liberal politico-legal institutions that arose to secure and regulate this mode of production. But while these faiths were transformed in various context-specific ways in relation to state and civil society, the interplay of religion and economy was never severed in the thoroughgoing manner held by some more literal understandings of “disenchantment.” All this was blatantly evident when European colonizers sought to modernize the rest of the world: humane imperialists like David Livingstone, saw commerce, Christianity and civilization as conditions of each others possibility, much like the ethos of the Neo Pentecostal Churches, which encourage the faithful to aspire for salvation in terms of a prosperity gospel of consumer desire.

But as this last example suggests, many of the features of contemporary Protestantism – at least, in this avid Pentecostal form – *are* new; the role of affect and desire in the nature of the religious ontology, for instance. Weber stressed the inherent Calvinist suspicion of emotion and spontaneous feeling, the distrust what he termed the “medieval” type of religion that strove for enjoyment of salvation in this world (2001:82). He famously highlighted the “strict and temperate discipline” that “protected the rational personality of the [Puritan] from his passions.” Yet, as I have suggested, this vision of the modern Protestant subject is at odds with the affective economy of much born-again belief, which takes untempered affect as a sign of the power of true faith, and harnesses the pursuit of worldly desire to the advent of God’s kingdom in the here and now. This revitalization, I have suggested, entails a reformation of key modernist demarcations of the sacred and the profane, private and the public, the church and the world. What is more, its intensification is not interpretable as simply an effect – or a cause – of current epochal transformations (of the advent of global, neoliberal

²⁰ This is a paraphrase of Engels, as cited by Andre Gunder Frank (1971:36).

capitalism, for instance) even though it is clearly an immanent feature of this complicated historical process.

In fact, I have tried to show that these shifts in the nature of religious life are not adequately seen as either ‘models of’ or ‘for’ new socio-economic forms; rather, they are intrinsically, dialectically entailed with the economic and technological transformations of the current moment. The institutional architecture associated with modern bureaucratic states is being cross-cut by novel forms of theodicy, by manifestations of sacred sovereignty that authorize new agglomerations, and build new lexicons of feeling, at once pre- and post-modern. These manifestations both respond to socio-economic shifts and themselves promote innovative modes of world-making. The Spirit of Revelation – or at least, of decidedly uncool passion – is among us once more, ministering to a reality that seems at odds with the tenets of secular reason. Yet it also shows surprising affinity with the hyper-rational ethos of deregulated, neoliberal capitalism: its urge to substitute the logic of the market for that of “society” or government; its eagerness to take the “waiting out of wanting;” its impetus to replace a disciplined, long-term accumulation of virtue with more “boom-and-bust” cycles of sin and rebirth. Those of us partial to an older humanist mode of understanding are challenged – in conditions like this – to think anew of ways in which ‘the sociological imagination’ can be defended.

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