The Redeemed Christian Church of Power? Pentecostalism, Civil Society and Political Legitimacy in Africa

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There is a marked tendency in accounts of the recent resurgence of civil society across sub-Saharan Africa to valorize the role of religion. This tendency is animated by the fact that wherever you look across the continent, religious authorities, leaders and the general laity appear to have played a prominent role both in radicalizing sundry social movements and in hastening the departure of conservative leaders—military or civilian. While, in some countries, the struggle to expand the democratic space was led by charismatic religious leaders, in many others, religious and secular leaders combined to evolve a new grammar of political mobilization that drew heavily on religious texts and homiletics. Such, indeed, was the influence of religious leaders and institutions that some scholars have expressed doubts as to whether the so-called ‘Third Wave’ of democratization would have achieved the modest gains we have come to associate with it in the absence of religious agency. With the jury still out on that question, it should be pointed out that developments in Africa in relation to the social utility of religious agency were in no way unique to the continent but were in fact comparable with patterns elsewhere, most notably events in Eastern Europe where the Catholic Church famously breathed life into and successfully galvanized dissent against respective communist totalitarian regimes.

However, two decades on, both the social and religious landscapes across Africa have so manifestly changed that analytic reckoning of some sort has become imperative. The analysis in this paper is subtended by two related changes. First is the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in Africa, by which we refer to the arguable capture of the overall African zeitgeist by Pentecostal agents. In the survival of the fittest that is the struggle for souls by churches and mosques in Africa, there is no doubt that Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like movements have stolen a march on their ‘mainstream’ rivals. This development is linked to another important change, which is the seeming de-radicalization of religious agency. The marriage of political leaders and religious authorities that was hurriedly consummated in the vortex of mobilization for political liberalization appears everywhere to have eventuated in churches, a critical part of the emergent civil society in Africa, vacating their erstwhile progressive positionality.

At this juncture, some pertinent questions present themselves for scholarly investigation: How did this process of ‘conservationing’ unfold and in what material environment? How can we begin to understand both the state and religious institutions in Africa from the perspective of these changes? What does all this mean for civil society in terms of its composition, ideologies, practices, and agenda for social change? Finally, what does this transformation in a crucial and increasingly influential aspect of civil society mean for civil society as whole? In this paper, we ground an exploration of these critical theoretical dilemmas in a specific empirical analysis of the formation, emergence and influence of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria. Our choice of the Redeemed Church is dictated by two reasons. First, it is the fastest growing Pentecostal church in the entire world with membership in a reported 125 countries. Second, with a reputation as the church of the politically powerful in Nigeria, and with a General Overseer who has the ear of both the Nigerian political and business elites, the Church embodies the narrative on the simultaneous ascendance and de-radicalizing of religious agency in Africa.

Jeffrey Haynes (1996, 6) suggests that “leading religious figures are very often class actors in partnership with political elites to achieve mutually advantageous goals.” While not suggesting that such ‘partnerships’ are doomed to linearity in producing only conservative ends, this paper argues that the sum total of such collaborations, at least in Nigeria, is a social formation in which an emergent ‘theocratic class’, comprising elements from the political class and the cream of the Pentecostal elite, problematizes the rules of politics and political praxis in favour of the political establishment.

The paper is therefore not just about changes in the nature of religious agency, but, more important, about transformations in state-civil society relations across Africa. In particular, against the background of the widely recognized importance of the church in democratization processes, we pay special attention to the way in which the state manipulates religion and religious figures for the purposes of political legitimacy, a project that is facilitated by popular religion’s insistence on the divine pedigree of all authority. Finally, we speculate on the possible consequences for civil society in terms of its secular projects and social mobilization.

This paper builds on the growing literature on civil society, democratization, religiosity, elite politics, and the public sphere in Africa. It draws on qualitative research data from interviews with religious leaders, politicians, and civil society activists. These interviews were conducted at different times by the two authors over the past five years.