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“The Rise of Pentecostal Power. Exploring the Politics of Pentecostal Growth in Nigeria and Guatemala”

Pentecostalism, in its many variations, is now only second to the Catholic Church in terms of Christian adherents across the world. Following exceptional growth since the late 1970ies, Pentecostals have gone from periphery to center of society, from being considered “religious fanatics” to becoming “mainstream” in many countries. Pentecostals constitute today major religious movements in countries as diverse as Guatemala, the Philippines, South Korea, Kenya and Nigeria. Despite the many similarities in how Pentecostalism has evolved across the continents the lack of comparative case-study research is striking.

This qualitative PhD-project addresses this gap. By examining two dissimilar countries that both have experienced strong Pentecostal growth- the African giant Nigeria and the much smaller Central American country Guatemala- this project asks an explorative question: what happens when Pentecostalism becomes big? With a specific interest in the politics of Pentecostalism this project approaches Pentecostalism by examining Pentecostal practices and strategies for making the movement relevant beyond the walls of the church, in politics, economics and culture. What are the similarities, and differences in how Pentecostalism goes public in the two countries?

Material has been gathered through conducting fieldwork in the two countries; such as doing interviews, observation and collection of primary material. The original impetus of this project was interest in Pentecostalism and its political role. José Casanova’s work on public religion guided the theoretical inquiries, but has needed rethinking in light of the material from the two cases. By expanding his notion of the political, and civil society, several crucial parallels appeared in the material: There are in Guatemala and Nigeria remarkable similarities in how Pentecostals go public in the two countries. In the wake of struggling democracies, pervasive impunity and poverty on one side, and the opportunities granted in the liberalization of the market, globalization and democratization on the other side, Pentecostals have become major actors across sectors of society. They have gone from shunning society, to actively embracing society. This has happened in relation to institutionalized politics, but probably more important through strong public presence in the media - and in the streets-, in the business sector and as welfare providers. Pentecostals are “everywhere”. But Pentecostals are not just “filling a gap” left by the crippled state, as some would suggest, but are engaging in the very political task of defining what this gap is and how to close it. By conquering the public sphere, or sacralising it, the Pentecostal interpretation of the world has become increasingly important for non-Pentecostals, too. While there are exemptions, Pentecostals have in general lent their support, active or passive, to the governments in questions, and has seldom engaged in criticism of state policies as other prominent civil society actors have. Rather than through confrontation, Pentecostals have entered the state through cooperation.

The rise of Pentecostalism has led to several conflicts, particularly with other religious actors. The animosity has gone both ways. But despite scepticism and opposition from mainline churches, there is in both Nigeria and Guatemala a process of *Pentecostalisation* of Christianity among non-Pentecostals. By entering society in different ways, Pentecostals have also been impacted by it, and changed their ways of doing religion. But a finding of this thesis is that, while Pentecostals indeed have become entangled in “worldly” affairs, what is more striking is how the world has become entangled in Pentecostal affairs.