

# 6

## Ruptures and Encompassments

### Towards an Absolute Truth

In Chapter 3 our portrait of Pentecost started out in a hyper-urban space. Key characteristics of ‘Pentecost’ are perhaps most clearly articulated and visible for observation in the hyper-urban contexts, as in many typical African metropolises densely populated and with infrastructural and security issues that affect the everyday lives of its residents. In particular, we looked at the neighbourhood of Palanca, which is described as being a ‘spiritual supermarket’ due to the contribution of one particular ethnic group, the Bakongo, marked by both Christianity and traditional beliefs (*ndoki*).

By acknowledging the ‘spatial effects’ of Pentecost, we highlighted the multiplicity of inscriptions and announcements that are offered on behalf of religious movements and institutions, offering diagnostics and solutions to their existential problems. We pointed out how people see these as particular itineraries inscribed in a place understood as one of ‘spiritual warfare’, particular of the plural condition of the urban lifestyle, where witchcraft plays a central role. These invitations for diagnostic and solution, and the spaces devised for welcoming those responding to the invitations – necessarily makeshift but inevitably ‘promising spaces’ (Cooper 2013) – are mechanisms of ordering, establishing a certain logic and truth in the otherwise chaotic lifestyle. This ordering appears as an ‘absolutist road’ in the sense that it admits no other possibility of truth other than that which is proposed. The absolutist road, although perhaps most visible in hyper-urban contexts, can also be found in ‘confessional regimes’ of former witches in the

Trobriand Islands, where a very clear path from darkness to light was designed, also marked by the dialectic between Christian faith and witchcraft. We could also recognize this focus on absolutism in the more modestly urban condition of the Pacific island capital Port Vila; for instance, in a Christian prophetess' description of life as a maze, a puzzle, with only one true answer and one true road. Here, there are no grey areas; you are either saved or damned. In this process, we realize how, in these paths, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that becomes central in the experience of the believers in 'Pentecost', as that which heals and combats evil and produces order, clarity, transparency – which in turn reveals an aesthetic of visual order.

This theory from Pentecost is, in the first place, one of moral absolutism, where 'solving problems' becomes part of a process of establishing a dogmatic solution, an order of things, a truth and is thus presented as unequivocal. It is also, as we will see below, the ground from which arguments of rupture/encompassment, iconoclasm and nostalgia emerge. This truth, or better yet the necessity of truth, appears as a response to sensations of uncertainty, ambiguity and 'fuzziness', as it were. However, if we began by explaining this conundrum as typical of the (African) urban lifestyle – the paradigm of chaos and insecurity – our journey through the 'Pentecosts' of Vanuatu and the Trobriand Islands reveals something different: that this logic is also displayed in rural settings, creating its own narrative regimes that recognize, often in a Manichean fashion, moral problems and their solutions. From this perspective, one could argue that 'Pentecost' is a space through which 'pluralism' emerges and is simultaneously negatively enveloped within an absolutist theory.

This negative envelope of the absolutist frame of mind, through which distinctions and conflicts emerge (between 'what is Christian and what is not'), has a particular effect, a form of resentment that is similar to, but not the same as, the more overarching sense of 'rupture' with which scholars of Pentecostalism are more familiar with. This resentment enacts a process of differentiation that is, as we will argue below, driven by an element of nostalgia. It enacts a form of separation within a 'present' that is inherently immanent.

From this perspective, the 'resentful theory' of absolutism that emerges from 'Pentecost' directly challenges theories that have emerged in the anthropology and sociology of Pentecostalism, and in the Anthropology of Christianity in particular, concerning two themes: the idea of Pentecostalism as an agent of 'rupture' and the idea of Pentecostalism as an eschatological theology. While many anthropological and sociological theories have highlighted the opposite in Pentecostal ideology – contextually based relativism, rupture and eschatological

definition – what the ‘journey’ through ‘Pentecost’ seems to have brought us is something quite different if not opposite. In what follows we will explore, by way of comparison, how the worldview and discourse that emerges from Pentecost relates to prevailing theories in the social sciences of religion, in particular concerning both points mentioned above.

## **Theories of Ruptures and Iconoclasm**

The idea that Pentecostalism produces a ‘rupture’, a separation or exclusion from something in order to create something new, can be considered a trademark of the anthropological studies of Pentecostalism. In a first instance, this framing can be considered natural, as it is an inference of the epistemological and experiential centrality that Pentecostalism – in its multiple instances: evangelicalism, charismatic movements, Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism – attributes to the issue of conversion at several levels – psychological, intersubjective, ritual, political etc. As several authors have noted, the idea and experience of conversion is not only axial but epistemologically geared towards a personal and political process of ‘transformation’. Peter Stromberg, for instance, noted how conversion stands upon a prior recognition of a situation of ‘contradiction’ (1993: xi), which is produced within a specific ‘communicative behavior’ and sparks the urge or drive towards change. Simon Coleman later observed that in processes of conversion a disjuncture is observed between the language – instant, radical – and the experience – gradual, complex – of conversion (2003). In any case, conversion becomes a process of what Elaine Lawless called ‘rescripting’ (1991), through which one ‘changes his or her own world’ (see Buckser and Glazier 2003) towards the creation of what Thomas Csordas eventually called ‘the sacred self’ (1994).

However, as recent contributions by Girish Daswani (2013) or Liana Chua (2012) have noted, Pentecostal movements of rupture go far beyond the act or idea of conversion. Daswani, for instance, placed this rupturism within an ethical movement and subject positionality, through which we could appreciate precisely the inconstancy of the translation of an exclusionary ideology and semiotics into an everyday practice, forming the ground upon which dialectics and disputes emerge within Pentecostal churches (2013). In this respect, judgements and statements about rupture often become situational and subjective, reminding us that the narrative or justification of ‘being saved’ in Pentecost does not warrant the actual experience of ‘being saved’. In other words, the liturgy of conversion, despite enacting rupture, does not actually enforce it and

thus rupture becomes something that is sought but not experienced. Presented as paradigm, rupture is in fact situational.

Chua, in turn, describes how the language of rupture acquires multiple tonalities in the framework of Pentecostal ideology and practice (2012). She addresses the notorious debate on conversion and (dis)continuity as proposed by Joel Robbins (2004) and others, which expanded beyond the study of emic worldviews and into disciplinary analytical discussion. She rightly notes that such issues emerge in a space of confluence between the lived experience of the believers, their affective and moral experiences, and the domain of politics and ideology (Chua 2012: 15) Here, following Chua, we are less interested in understanding how conversion enacts discontinuity and more in its insertion within wider languages and semiotics of distinction and (possibly) exclusion in this space of confluence. Such languages of exclusion, as we will argue, are effected through absolutist arguments and become primarily about combatting uncertainty, anxiety etc.

In this line of thought, perhaps the most influential discussion on the problem of rupture was performed by Birgit Meyer, with her debate on discourses of 'making a complete break with the past' in Ghana (1998), which equated problems of rupture in terms of temporal experience and ideology. In her famous article, she explains how, among the Ewe in Ghana, this 'complete break with the past' was a form of rejecting any kind of synthesis with local culture – as mainline protestants would propose, for instance – and creating a new sense of allegiance with a modern, 'global culture' (Poewe 1994). From this perspective, Meyer noted the parallelism between the individualizing dimension of conversion and self-transformation and the fashioning of modernity in terms of progress and continuous renewal (1998: 317). Consequently, she adds, there is a particular focus on time that enables for a specific Pentecostal narrative towards the promotion of an individual and social change, through logics of salvation, purification and so on. In a time and place (postcolonial Africa) in which notions of heritage and cultural salvage were important political tropes, the Pentecostal discourse emerged as a counterpoint, introducing ideas of salvation and redemption as 'solutions' for underdevelopment. From this perspective, she argues, in Pentecostalism there is no place for nostalgia and no attempts to 'return to the whole', to paraphrase James Fernandez's notion (1986: 3 ff.).

This future-oriented time-centredness was later addressed by Matthew Engelke, who noted that the rupture with the past is, more often than not, a rhetorical device that in fact provokes a process of realignment with the past (2010) – a reconfiguration or redefinition. As authors such as Filip de Boeck (2005) or Jane Guyer (2007) have shown

us, it is undeniable that an Evangelical and Pentecostal worldview produces specific eschatological narratives – of the millennial and eventually apocalyptic guise – that have specific material consequences for the believers in terms of orientation and self-positioning.

We also found this in Ruy's previous research with Pentecostal Gypsies in Portugal and Spain: their massive conversion to the Filadelfia church provoked not only a significant change in the Gypsies' lives by making the church pervasive in their everyday lives but also a rewriting of their own past as an ethnically informed collective. This rewriting implied understanding their collective past as a path filled with sacrifice and suffering, but guided towards their ultimate salvation (Blanes 2008). From this perspective, the past was as important as the future for the Pentecostalized narrative that the pastors of the Filadelfia church conveyed. On the one hand, it appeared as a preconversion alterity that became an object of rejection, invaded with stories of personal and collective perdition – from drug and alcohol abuse to criminal activities, prison, discrimination etc. But also and simultaneously, this past never disappeared; it was always there for taking, as it were, by the testimonials and pedagogies of the biblical studies promoted by the church. And it was conjured with another past – that of the Bible and its exemplary function. This is precisely the dynamic character of Pentecostal temporality that Engelke (2010: 177) noted – the constant movement of semantic redefinition between the future and the past – or what Daswani calls a 'constant re-creation' (2013: 468). Within this framework, if there are certain pasts that have become an object of rejection, other pasts also become objects of reception and persist in the Pentecostal vocabulary – in particular, the preconversion past, which also becomes the present when pastors and preachers address the complexity of the contemporary here and now: it is observable in the lives and behaviour of the non-converts and is engaged through a missionary posture.

Through our 'journey through Pentecost', what we realized is precisely this: more than breaking with the past, perhaps what is at stake for Pentecostals is actually breaking with the present – a dangerous ordeal, as Ruth Marshall (2009: 65) frames it (see also Daswani 2013: 471) – conducive to both nostalgia and future thinking. Perhaps this idea is better illustrated with the distinction operated by Dan Jorgensen in his research on Pentecostal movements in Papua New Guinea (2005) – and following from Joel Robbins' debate on continuity and rupture in Christian conversion (2004) – between what he called 'world-breaking' and 'world making'. If the former is about severing ties, disconnecting, rejecting etc., the latter reveals the concrete topographies that emerge from that process, often framed in Manichean categorizations and

territorializations: evil versus good, saved versus lost, etc. This is something that both Filip de Boeck (2005) and Katrien Pype (2012) have successfully described in the case of Kinshasa, DR Congo: the specific urban configurations and infrastructural recognition that emerge from the Pentecostal worldview, produced through movements of separation and delimitation. The main point here, we believe, is the concomitance and dialectical character of these processes, by which the projection of evil into the past becomes part of a wider political conceptualization of time that renders it simultaneously 'present' in the lived experience of the believers. It becomes part of an inherent dialecticalism that is necessary for the Pentecostal rhetoric (see Mafra 2002). And precisely, it is a nostalgic dialectic because it prevents oblivion.

But with nostalgia we are not necessarily talking about an anti-modern movement that combats the irreversible wheel of time and shies away from the new – quite the opposite in fact (Angé and Berliner 2015a, 2015b). As David Berliner and Olivia Angé note, more than a longing for a lost past, nostalgia operates a structuring of temporal frameworks, mediated by a moralizing, eventually political conservative worldview (2015a: 4). What is interesting in such nostalgic configurations is how they appear implicitly or explicitly associated with ideas of order – an order that is no longer existing and may even have never existed but appears as a powerful temporal reference. This order often appears in this conservative discourse under the guise of 'simplicity' (absence of multiplicity) but also of a hierarchy of things. In other words, against the cultural relativist idea of 'anything goes' and in favour of the dogmatic prevalence of a moral system, which in the case of Pentecost comes down to the Bible and its literalist, fundamentalist hermeneutics. And it is precisely through a moral angle that nostalgia is often framed as an anti-relativist stance.

From this perspective, Pentecostalism is often understood to share the same kind of 'postmodern angst' as other nostalgic theories – that is, the longing for simplification, clarity lost in the process of pluralism and cultural relativism. Thus it is nostalgic because it longs for something, an idea of the absolute, which can indeed be located in the past but not necessarily: it can be located in the future yet to come. We will return to the problem of the absolute below.

Within this framework, another perhaps less noted aspect of Meyer's theory of rupture is how the Pentecostal struggle against the 'past' is also located in a particular realm: that of Satan and satanic expressions in the believers' everyday lives (1998: 318ff.). In other words, the 'past' that the Pentecostals try to 'break from' is embedded within an ideology of warfare against satanic forces. As she describes in her text, the

attempts, on behalf of local pastors, to 'Africanize' Christian churches were decried by Pentecostals as 'invitation(s) of Satan himself to the church' (1998: 319). This conflation of 'tradition' (in particular, local systems of belief) and 'Satanism' not only inaugurates the dialectical mode of Pentecostalism but also places it within the temporalizing perspective that creates a particular 'past' that is operative in the present. As Ruth Marshall describes for Nigerian Pentecostals, this is often presented in terms of the ambition of an imminent redemption that will not only allow for the forthcoming *parousia* (the full presence of God) but also combat, through the force of the Holy Spirit, the 'lawlessness' provoked by satanic forces in the current age (2009: 205 ff.). In this respect, the theory of Satanism identified by Pentecostals in Nigeria conflates ideas of past and present evil, combatted with a (Pentecostal) language of conquest and invasion (see also Coleman 2000).

However, this configuration does not condemn evil, disorder and lawlessness to a mere alterity. As we know, the Pentecostal narrative of conversion works upon ideas of sin, which incorporate the individual and psychological dimensions of the Pentecostal experience. Within this framework, Pentecostals are the 'soldiers of Christ' (Ojo 2006; O'Neill 2010) that march against Satan but also incorporate the 'moral torment' of recognizing one's own, embedded sinfulness (Robbins 2004) proper of our condition as humans. This was very eloquently explained by Ruth Marshall in her analysis of the Pentecostal political theology: 'Pentecostalism's antinomianist tendencies, the importance of *sole fides*, and an embodied, charismatic, and experiential faith means that its engagement, particularly in the context of post-colonial anarchic and authoritarian exception, is not one of a theocratic re-foundation. And the first enemy to be identified is the enemy within the self' (Marshall 2010: 201).

This duality and concomitance of a satanic 'lawlessness' and a personal vulnerability can also be understood within a wider sociopolitical setting, in what Jean Comaroff (2010) described as the problem of relativism (the 'anything goes') and crisis of meaning that is the main object of Pentecostal interlocution.

I will return to the point of relativism later on in this chapter. At this point, we are interested in exploring the problem of meaning – its lack or production – and its material, expressive consequences. From this perspective, the scientific theory of Pentecostalism as rupture and producer of alterity makes for what could be called an 'iconoclastic pragmatics', through which Pentecostals enact some form of scission that is socially and politically operative through their location of evil in specific material configurations – from fetishes to images and figures.

Interestingly enough, the anthropological study of Pentecostalism has not been inspired or interested in addressing iconoclasm as a key factor for the understanding of this movement's narrative. However, if we continue to consider (as the prevailing literature does) Pentecostalism as a social movement of 'rupture', we cannot ignore its iconoclastic dimension, in particular when Pentecostalism has often been engaged in literal acts of iconoclasm, such as the destruction of iconic figures, images and representations from other religious or secular movements (see e.g. Giumbelli 2014; Rio, MacCarthy and Blanes 2017). Such processes are, more often than not, described as entailing (physical and symbolic) violence, acts of belligerence against the 'other' – satanists, witches, traditionalists etc. – but also against the self – the preconversion body, as described, for instance, by Linda van de Kamp in her study of Pentecostalism in Mozambique (2012).

From this perspective, as Ramon Sarró noted (2008), iconoclasm, as an act, incorporates a necessarily destructive dimension, usually tended towards the physical elimination of something that is seen as negatively powerful. But he notes a distinction between kinds of destruction: the destruction of things because of what they *represent* – as we could see recently, for instance, with the destruction of statues in Palmyra, on behalf of ISIS supporters – and the destruction of things because of what they *make present*, the invisible forces that they materialize (2008: 2). From this perspective, Pentecostalism can be understood to have both dimensions, either through physical acts of destruction or through ritual and/or linguistic configurations that operate logics of rejection, sectarianism, exclusion etc. This becomes evident in the kind of proscriptions that constitute the Pentecostal (or Christian, for that matter) theology: what is forbidden, rejected, combatted – and what is justified, permitted, holy. Here, as Willem van Asselt et al. have debated (2007), religion is built upon controversy, which is displayed through both material (iconoclasm) and mental (iconoclash) acts of destruction. But Sarró also questions if indeed iconoclasm is only about destruction of a given 'heritage' (2008: 5). In fact, iconoclasm engages in semiotic renewal; more often than not by way of 'replacement' – i.e. of re-semanticizing or revaluing objects, persons, actions or ideas. The overarching process may well be one of substitution.

This is why, for instance, Pentecostalism is presented as being against iconicity, while it cultivates other kinds of aesthetic paradigms. In Chapter 3, for instance, we discussed some of these elements: architecture, chromatic elements, clothing and so on. Clara Mafra, in her article on neo-Pentecostal architecture in Brazil, described how an otherwise anti-Catholic ideology incorporates certain 'techniques of seduction'

that can equally be observed in the grand, majestic Cathedrals throughout Europe (2003). There seems to be, therefore, a Pentecostal aesthetics that enables the materialization of collective imaginaries into the realm of the concrete.

In this respect, the work of Filip de Boeck in Kinshasa is a case in point. In his article on the 'apocalyptic interlude' (2005), he describes the temporal shifting and scaling produced by millennial (and Pentecostal) prophecy that fed into 'collective imaginary' he found in Kinshasa, experiencing economic (absolute precariousness and poverty), political (Mobutism and its legacy) and spiritual (the implantation of charismatic and Pentecostal churches) transformations. He describes the emergence and circulation of millenarian certainties, sensations of catastrophic imminence and political contestations in an analogous fashion to what Jean and John Comaroff (2001) described for South Africa or what Joel Robbins (2001) recognized in Papua New Guinea: how senses and imminences of rupture are in fact bound within the 'Pentecostal everyday', equally informing spatial, temporal and political dwellings.

The same logic was noted by Katrien Pype (2012) when she described Kinshasa as a moral territory dominated by Pentecostal-originated apocalyptic imaginaries, where its inhabitants' quotidian is permanently experienced as a function of a battle between forces of good and evil (see also Knibbe 2009; Maskens 2012). Consequently, she explores narratives and creations that respond to, and simultaneously convey and reproduce, this apocalyptic scenery: the industry and consumption of Pentecostal television melodramas. One such result is precisely how the city of Kinshasa becomes remapped into 'holy' and 'evil' spaces. But Pype takes the argument further by explaining how Pentecostals 'curse the city' (2012: 27), which reveals, more than merely mapping, Pentecostals act upon the city, determining its inhabitation through moral statements and propounding the path towards success (Gilbert 2015; Haynes 2012).

Both De Boeck and Pype's analyses invoke processes of (both temporal and topographical) constructions of 'certainty', of unequivocal determinations. As Wendy James (1995) notes, the religious 'pursuit of certainty' is one of building identity through allegiance, in response to fear and ignorance in times of complexity and turmoil. Thus, we realize that there is an intersection of claims to knowledge (understanding 'what it is all about') and senses of belonging and collective identity ('I am not alone in how I think') that become paramount in Pentecostal ideology. In the process, what begins as a temporalizing argument that establishes eschatological routes progressively becomes a space of effect, with specific consequences in the lives of those that live in and around Pentecost.

From this perspective, the acoustic environment stemming from the UCKG church in Palanca, near Maturino's family house, signals the kind of consequence of 'presentification' effected by Pentecost's absolutist stance, concretizing paths towards certainty. Within this framework, if above we described Pentecost as essentially 'breaking with the present', here we realize that, in doing so, it establishes alternative presents, recognizable through architectural, aesthetic and geographic elements.

## **A Theory of Absolutism**

The anthropological literature on Pentecostalism debated above showed us how this social movement relies on processes of rupture and the creation of alterities geared towards a (metaphorical or physical) place of certainty. However, the kind of ruptures articulated in 'Pentecost', and described in Chapter 3, were far subtler and more complex than the cases discussed above: Although they do not exclude logics of rupture and violence, they are often about epistemological configurations and reconfigurations that establish what we could call a teleological path: a trajectory that embodies a sense of design and destiny within a wider space of multiplicity. Let us go back, for instance, to the Bible that Rose held with her in Port Vila. Perceiving that Annelin was in a stage of uncertainty – an ethnographic one – she handed her the Bible and presented it as a sort of manual through which you can open the right doors that will lead you into the 'right road'. This 'right road' is precisely what the different posters offer in places like Luanda's 'Pentecost', with invitations for your personal salvation by this or that church, pastor or evangelist. However, they dwell simultaneously as single choices that nevertheless appear multiplied in the city's walls and religious architectures. Which way to go? The idea of 'supermarket', as framed by Neves in Luanda, hinted on this idea of multiplicity and fuzziness motivated by an excessive and uncontrolled offer of spiritual routes. 'All this black magic, this evil wisdom is not good': such were the words of Pastor Nunes of the EKWESA.

This is what made believers such as Rose or Neves struggle until they finally felt they had found their right path: paths of certainty, wellbeing and wealth. From this perspective, acts of healing and destruction such as those described in Chapter 3, although unequivocally part of the Pentecostal ethos, appear more as means rather than ends in themselves. They are part of a logic of diagnosis and therapeutics, but they are first and foremost a process of discernment and identifying borders, as described in Chapter 1, and also of learning to stay within them. This

is what we described in Chapter 3 when we saw the ‘enveloping effect’ that the churches created in their continuous liturgical programmes that enacted constant prayer and protection for the enabling of a space of ‘insurance’ (*assegurado*). ‘As Jesus Christ says, your faith saved you,’ to go back to Pastor Nunes’ words.

What seems to be at stake, therefore, is a process of elimination of ‘grey areas’, spaces of diffuse, ambiguous, uncertain or contradictory meaning. This is what we observed in the kind of ‘dark spaces’ that Michelle identified in Kiriwina – the spaces of witchcraft and evil that are inherent to the state of spiritual warfare and which often create contexts of confrontation, as we saw in the case of witchcraft accusations.

On the other hand, if in Kiriwina the dark past appeared as the place from which to move away, in Luanda we realized that more than the future some churches seek the past as the place of redemption. This was the case, for instance, of the EKWESA, who sought this redemption in the ‘ancestralization’ of the Christian narrative, which refocused personal and collective spiritual histories into an afro-centred perspective. This reveals that, more than mere rupture, we are before a reconfiguration in which the eschatological element only makes sense in terms of a redemption of the past, as Walter Benjamin would put it. This is indicative of how the ‘right path’ is not necessarily a way forward but more a ‘compass’ that guides you through a process of anamnesis – rediscovery of our once lost reminiscences – into one of multiple directionalities.

In this respect, the pull of Pentecost appears, in this new angle, subsumed within a wider, more abstract movement of reaction against the ‘status quo’ – both personal and social. However, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, one could also affirm that what was initially understood as a rupturist or iconoclastic movement is also one of encompassment, of ingestion and domestication, as it were. This act of domestication is precisely what solves the apparent conundrum in a movement that simultaneously rejects and embraces the past, ‘tying’ them up into a future-oriented narrative. Here is precisely where the notion of the absolute, as an idea of ‘truth’, righteousness and (moral, physical) wealth, begins to make sense.

### **Synthesis: Anti-relativism, Nostalgia and the Absolute Truth**

After our journey through the anthropology of Pentecostalism and through the space of ‘Pentecost’, we return to the question: what is

really at stake in the Pentecostal appeal? What is the 'Pentecostal effect', in places like Luanda, Port Vila or Kiriwina? In our portraits in Part I of this book, we have seen that 'Pentecost' does not necessarily imply an extreme act of rupture, nor does it configure itself as exclusively eschatological. It is an act of identification and discernment that does not reject but rather encompasses alterity.

From this perspective, the moral demand of Pentecostalism is directed both towards an 'outside' (a sociological alterity) and an 'inside' (an individual subjectivity). In a sense, what seems to be at stake is Pentecostalism's fundamentalist stance, the 'demand for a strict adherence' to theological precepts such as conservatism, literalism etc. (see, e.g., Harding 2000). This puts into question how the social sciences of religion place Pentecostalism vis-à-vis modernity. On the one hand, Pentecostalism is almost unanimously connoted with modernity – as one of its agents, protagonists, consequences or effects – through processes such as globalization, capitalism (or neoliberalism), mobility, technology, urbanity etc. (see, e.g., Comaroff 2009; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Maxwell 1998; Meyer 1998).

On the other hand, Pentecostalism often stages a powerful critique to modernity 'at large' and what it considers to be cause and/or context of moral corruption or degeneration, in particular due to the (perceived) subsequent triumph of moral relativism or, at most, a-moralism (Cargal 1993; Poloma 1989). One case in point, for instance, is the HIV crisis in Africa and how Pentecostal churches deliver from one of modernity's 'wounds' (see, e.g., Bochow and Van Dijk 2012; Dilger 2007; Dilger, Burchardt and Van Dijk 2010; Newell 2007).

In most cases, such critiques emerge from a fundamentalist theology. Fundamentalism is based on the idea of biblical inerrancy established through an (often Manichean) epistemological irreducibility and a subsequent politics of conviction (Harding 2000). For many Christian fundamentalists, the 'fundamentals' of life can only be found in the Bible, which is crystallized in a 'deep temporality', as it were – one that transcends the specifics of our modern times. From this perspective, as a fundamentalist methodology, the kind of biblical hermeneutics practised by Pentecostals often become literalist. In his study of literalism in America, Vincent Crapanzano (2000) explored it as an 'interpretive style' that addresses problems of 'law' and 'truth', exceeding the religious and theological realm. This interpretive style, which transforms into experience, is precisely what creates an absolutist thinking that combats what was eventually described as 'the dictatorship of relativism' proper of liberal humanism (see Comaroff 2010; Monbiot 2005). As Jean Comaroff recently described, it is an impetuous 'politics of conviction'

that combats senses of 'widespread deregulation' in the contemporary world (2010).

However, what our 'journey through Pentecost' brought us was an expression of how this politics of conviction is played out on a different level: it is a form of personal and collective pursuit, through which adherents learn to close doors and open others and reduce the 'grey matter' of life into a more cogent (but also more binary) black and white scenery, where the everyday complexity of life can be decoded into simpler, straightforward statements. This is why Pentecostalism emerges as inherently dialectic and combative. But if this idea of combat is proper of the political level, we can also observe how it unfolds at more subjective and interpersonal levels. Here, the Bible assumes a central role as a space of 'comfort, inspiration, council, strength and conviction' (Bielo 2009: 1) but also and especially as a critical mindset through which adherents reflect and question their lives and the world. This is what we observed, for instance, in Annelin's account of Rose's 'crossroads sensation' sensation, in Michelle's account of 'recognizing darkness' in Kiriwina, or in Pastor Nunes' re-elaboration of Christian theodicy in Luanda. In such cases, the Bible acted as guidance but also required a subsequent act of decodification in itself. These acts of decodification are, ultimately, acts of reduction of relativism and creation of an 'absolute' space.

But both these dimensions – political and personal, experiential – may or may not couple into a neat, coherent worldview. As we know, dogmas do not eliminate contradictions. But perhaps the point of intersection between both levels is the necessity of a sense of the 'absolute'. In 1997, the literary critic George Steiner published an essay entitled 'Nostalgia for the Absolute', in which, inserted within a Weberian secularization paradigm, he claimed that the decline of traditional religious forms and institutions in Western culture has created a sense of 'moral and emotional emptiness' that has given way to the emergence of 'alternative mythologies' such as Marxism, Freudian psychology, structuralism etc. In this respect, in Western society, scientific rationalism, as well its companion scepticism, rendered obsolete formerly established religious systems otherwise seen as encompassing and paradigmatic. After this decline, Steiner argues, society required the emergence of 'secular messiahs' as surrogates of sorts.

While we have serious concerns with Steiner's generalizing argument and depiction of the human impetus – was there ever a sense of 'absolute' to begin with? And what ever happened to the 'religious decline' he mentions? – we take two relevant points from his proposal: the idea of a 'nostalgia for the absolute' that is politically operative and agent;

and the concomitant process of moral mapping that emerges from this recognition. These are, precisely, the processes that are at stake in our theory from Pentecost – the nostalgia for the absolute.

But before engaging in both ideas, what is this *absolute*, and why can Pentecostalism be framed as absolutist? Here we are thinking specifically of moral absolutism, an ethical normativity that is inherently Manichean and grounds itself upon the unquestionability of its principles or precepts. In Christian cultures, this unquestionability emerges from the kind of hermeneutics that is applied to the Bible as an undeniable ‘source of truth’, as well as of purity: its divine origin, infallibility, historical reality and, in particular, its actuality – i.e. its quasi-atemporal capacity to ‘unlock’ the mysteries of the world throughout the millennia.

Such argumentations produce what Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle recently described in their critical analysis of capitalism as ‘cartographies of the absolute’: ‘processes of inquiry and sight involved in the endeavor to understand the world, and the magnitude of the ambition behind such an all-encompassing will-to-know’ (2015). They subsequently explore the idea of the ‘view from above’ in order to address how encompassing thinking plays a role in today’s political thinking (ibid.). This encompassing view from above is precisely what produces a ‘true ontology’ (ibid.), the access to the ‘real nature of things’. Within this framework, ‘(t)he “absolute” is a theological and then a philosophical category, gesturing towards that which defies representation, which, contrasted to our mortal perception, is infinite and unencompassed’ (ibid.). The absolute is unencompassed, but we perceive it as a form of encompassment of our perceived surroundings.

## **Conclusion: Returning to the Whole**

While most literature on Pentecostalism has focused on rupturist and eschatological frames, what we realized through our journey through ‘Pentecost’ was that what is often at stake is a movement of what James Fernandez once called ‘returning to the whole’ (1986), of accessing the fundamental principles, logics and (Lévi-Straussian) structures of the ‘real world’. Truth be said, Fernandez was not focusing on Pentecostalism but rather on the performativity of tropes in culture, from the viewpoint of the then called ‘African revitalization movements’, such as the Celestial Christians in Cotonou, Benin. From this perspective, he develops an ‘argument of images’ (visualizations, pictorializations) whereby the recognition of a social or cultural whole is identified. However, he explores a theme that we see as inherent to the theory of the Absolute explored in

this chapter: the idea of ‘conviction of wholeness’ that emerges from the ‘discovery of meaning’ and the against agnosticism, pluralism and ‘particulate’ experience of modern life (1986: 160). Interestingly enough, he invokes Lévi-Strauss’s example of a roomful of mirrors to explain the ‘savage mind’s’ knowledge of totality: ‘a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening spaces) although without being strictly parallel. A multitude of images forms simultaneously, none exactly like any other – none furnishing more than a partial knowledge – but the group is characterized by invariant properties expressing a truth’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 263). As Fernandez will argue (1986: 3 ff.), it is through tropes and semiotics that one begins to acknowledge the wholeness of the picture, emerging as a musical symphony of sorts – a conjunction of significant and expressions that ‘makes sense’. All too similar with Rose’s crossroads dilemma.

From this perspective, we could argue that Pentecostalism offers ‘whole narratives’ that encompass the good and the bad, the holy and the evil, and offer the possibility of a purpose in life. As we argued above, this is performed through binary Manichean methodologies that lead the believer through an absolutist road, one that produces ultimate certainty. But this absolutism, despite its appearance, is not merely exclusionary, as it relies on acts of encompassment through which it builds its righteous itinerary. But in order to become an itinerary, it requires the presence of non-absolute possibilities. Likewise, the Pentecostal worldview requires non-Pentecostal possibilities in order to become effective. From this perspective, we could argue that Pentecostalism poses a very Levi-Straussian method of organizing the world through structuralist points of view: by relationships of contrast. It offers a ‘view from above’ that divides the world into binaries. Within this framework, the ‘Pentecostal holism’ that Jean Comaroff describes (2010: 21) also acts simultaneously in both directions: it is combative of certain cartographies (the unholy or satanic spaces), but it is also encompassing in how even the excluded cartographies are necessary for the Pentecostal believer to devise and discern his or her own itinerary towards what Hegel once called the ‘Absolute Spirit’, the place of ultimate truth. It is here, precisely, where we perceive that the absolutist stance enacts rupture and exclusion in order to achieve encompassment and holism.

But Fernandez’s idea of the ‘whole’ is as important as that of ‘return’, as it indicates a temporal mode that is not just expectant but also and equally nostalgic. This nostalgia is not necessarily directed towards a particular past; instead, it is directed towards an anti-relativist possibility that can be found in a deeper temporality, one that is almost atemporal in its mythic quality: biblical or ancestral times. These times

may or may not be located in a historical empirie and can indeed be fictive, but in any case they operate a sense of longing – a longing for something that is not the complexified, relativist present. And it is in the fulfilment of that longing that the absolutist path emerges. This was the case of several of the protagonists of Chapter 3. Rose, for instance, saw in the Bible a ‘door that opens’ towards clarity – the same clarity (or absence of ‘grey areas’) that was observed by Stephen in Kiriwina, who healed his fellow villagers with the certainty of God’s company. Likewise, if Rose found her way out of the crossroads, so did Ruy’s friend Neves, who eventually found his ‘spiritual home’ after years of wandering and doubt. These paths configure, precisely, the absolutist road towards salvation, which ultimately appears as a form of transcendence of the anti-relativist and anti-pluralist resentment that the Pentecostal worldview sets into motion.

## References

- Angé, O. and D. Berliner. 2015a. ‘Pourquoi la Nostalgie?’, *Terrain* 65: 4–11.
- . 2015b. *Anthropology and Nostalgia*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.
- Bielo, J. 2009. *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*. New York: New York University Press.
- Blanes, R.L. 2008. *Os Aleluias: Ciganos Evangélicos e Música*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Bochow, A. and R.V. Dijk. 2012. ‘Christian Creations of New Spaces of Sexuality, Reproduction, and Relationships in Africa: Exploring Faith and Religious Heterotopia’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4(4): 325–44.
- Buckser, A. and S. Glazier. 2003. *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cargal, T. 1993. *Restoring the Diaspora: Discursive Structure and Purpose in the Epistle of James*. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Chua, L. 2012. *The Christianity of Culture: Conversion, Ethnic Citizenship, and the Matter of Religion in Malaysian Borneo*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Coleman, S. 2000. *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2003. ‘Continuous Conversion? The Rhetoric, Practice, and Rhetorical Practice of Charismatic Protestant Conversion’, in A. Buckser and S. Glazier (eds), *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 15–27.
- Comaroff, J. 2009. ‘The Politics of Conviction: Faith in the Neoliberal Frontier’, *Social Analysis* 53(1): 17–38.
- . 2010. ‘The Politics of Conviction: Faith on the Neo-liberal Frontier’, in B. Kapferer, K. Telle and A. Eriksen (eds), *Contemporary Religiosities: Emergent Socialities in the Post-Nation-State*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn, pp. 17–38.

- Comaroff, J. and J.L. Comaroff. 2001. 'Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming', in J. and J. Comaroff (eds), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1–57.
- Cooper, D. 2013. *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Corten, A. and R. Marshall-Fratani (eds). 2001. *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Crapanzano, V. 2000. *Serving the Word: Literalism in America, from the Pulpit to the Bench*. New York: New Press.
- Csordas, T. 1994. *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Daswani, G. 2013. 'On Christianity and Ethics: Rupture as Ethical Practice in Ghanaian Pentecostalism', *American Ethnologist* 40(3): 467–79.
- De Boeck, F. 2005. 'The Apocalyptic Interlude: Revealing Death in Kinshasa', *African Studies Review* 48(2): 1–32.
- Dilger, H. 2007. 'Healing the Wounds of Modernity: Salvation, Community and Care in a Neo-Pentecostal Church in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37(1): 59–83.
- Dilger, H., M. Burchardt and R. Van Dijk. 2010. 'Introduction – The Redemptive Moment: HIV Treatments and the Production of New Religious Spaces', *African Journal of AIDS Research* 9(4): 373–83.
- Engelke, M. 2010. 'Past Pentecostalism: Notes on Rupture, Realignment, and Everyday Life in Pentecostal and African Independent Churches', *Africa* 80(2): 177–99.
- Fernandez, J. 1986. 'Returning to the Whole', in *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 3–27.
- Gilbert, J. 2015. 'The Heart as Compass: Preaching Self-worth and Success to Single Young Women in a Nigerian Pentecostal Church', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 45(3): 307–333.
- Giumbelli, E. 2014. *Simbolos Religiosos em Controvérsia*. São Paulo: Sem Nome.
- Guyer, J.I. 2007. 'Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time', *American Ethnologist* 34(3): 409–21.
- Harding, S. 2000. *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Haynes, N. 2012. 'Pentecostalism and the Morality of Money: Prosperity, Inequality, and Religious Sociality on the Zambian Copperbelt', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(1): 123–39.
- James, W. (ed.) 1995. *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Formulations*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jorgensen, D. 2005. 'Third Wave Evangelism and the Politics of the Global in Papua New Guinea: Spiritual Warfare and the Recreation of Place in Telefolmin', *Oceania* 75(4): 44–461.
- Knibbe, K. 2009. "'We Did Not Come Here as Tenants, but as Landlords": Nigerian Pentecostals and the Power of Maps', *African Diaspora* 2(2): 133–58.

- Lawless, E. 1991. 'Rescripting their Lives and Narratives: Spiritual Life Stories of Pentecostal Women Preachers', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7(1): 53–71.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mafra, C. 2002. *Na Posse da Palavra: Religião, Conversão e Liberdade Pessoal em Dois Contextos Nacionais*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- . 2003. 'A Sedução em Tempo de Abundância: Análise das Igrejas Pentecostais como Objetos de Arte', in O.Velho (ed.) *Circuitos Infinitos, Comparações e Religiões no Brasil, Argentina, Portugal, França e Grã-Bretanha*. São Paulo: Attar Editorial/CNPq/Pronex, pp. 95–126.
- Marshall, R. 2009. *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2010. 'The Sovereignty of Miracles: Pentecostal Political Theology in Nigeria', *Constellations* 17(2): 197–223.
- Maskens, M. 2012. 'Spiritual Geographies: Mobility of Pentecostal Ministers and Migratory "Miracles" between Africa or Latin America and Europe', *Brussels Studies* 58: 1–11.
- Maxwell, D. 1998. "Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?": Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28(3): 350–73.
- Meyer, B. 1998. 'Make a Complete Break with the Past: Memory and Post-colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28(3): 316–49.
- Monbiot, G. 2005. 'My Heroes are Driven by God, but I'm Glad My Society Isn't', *The Guardian*, 11 October.
- Newell, S. 2007. 'Pentecostal Witchcraft: Neoliberal Possession and Demonic Discourse in Ivoirian Pentecostal Churches', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37(4): 461–90.
- Ojo, M. 2006. *The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- O'Neill, K. 2010. *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Poewe, K. (ed.) 1994. *Charismatic Christianity as Global Culture*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Poloma, M. 1989. *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas*. Memphis: University of Tennessee Press.
- Pype, K. 2012. *The Making of the Pentecostal Melodrama: Religion, Media and Gender in Kinshasa*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.
- Rio, K., M. MacCarthy and R. Blanes (eds). 2017. *Pentecostalism and Witchcraft: Spiritual Warfare in Africa and Melanesia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robbins, J. 2001. 'Secrecy and the Sense of an Ending: Narrative, Time, and Everyday Millenarianism in Papua New Guinea and in Christian Fundamentalism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43(3): 525–51.
- . 2004. 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 117–43.

- Sarró, R. 2008. *The Politics of Religious Change in the Upper Guinea Coast: Iconoclasm Done and Undone*. Edinburgh: International African Library.
- Steiner, G. 1997. *Nostalgia for the Absolute*. Toronto: Anansi Press.
- Stromberg, P. 1993. *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toscano, A. and J. Kinkle. 2015. *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Alresford: Zero Books.
- Van Asselt, W. et al. (eds). 2007. *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm: Struggle for Religious Identity*. Leiden: Brill.
- Van de Kamp, L. 2012. 'Converting the Spirit Spouse: The Violent Transformation of the Pentecostal Female Body in Maputo, Mozambique', *Ethnos* 76(4): 510–33.