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Prosperity Pentecostalism as Theological Presentism

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In the words of Pastor Kufuna, "I don't want my 'pie in the sky,' I want my pie *now!*" What are we to make of these words, and particularly their hard to miss theological presentism, within the context of Naomi Haynes' argument that Copperbelt Pentecostals experience time as an 'expansive present'? While I welcome this timely attempt to push the Anthropology of Christianity beyond a rupture/continuity paradigm, I am left with a strong sense that the Pentecostal present being described is considerably less expansive than Haynes contends. Instead, what I find in Haynes' ethnography and analysis is a tightly focused theological presentism that co-opts the (biblical) past and abolishes the (eschatological) future in favour of a temporally circumscribed here-and-now.

For Copperbelt Pentecostals, 'the Bible is less a predictor of the future, a template of what is to come, than a model of – and more importantly, a model for – the present' (p8). Yet, surely an expansive Christian present would require both the presence of the present *and* the presence of the future in order to be so enlarged? Among the Brethren of Gamrie (Webster 2013), this was certainly the case, where present-day concerns about future eschatological events were simultaneously said to be prophetic fulfilments of the biblical past. In Gamrie, past, present, and future were temporally conjoined and yet *also* remained distinct; the present was now, *as well as* being ancient and futuristic – a phenomena that, with Jacob Hickman, I call 'temporal coalescence' (Hickman and Webster, Forthcoming).

Not so on the Copperbelt, where this distinct yet coalesced temporality was denied in favour of a 'short-circuiting' (p22) of the future by the present, whereby 'the future is now' (p22). Notably, this act of temporal abolition seems to go one step further, even, than Guyer's analysis of the 'evacuation of the near future' (2007: 409), since, in Nsofu, the future is not merely evacuated, but is actually disappeared by a theological presentism that, in effect, only has eyes for today. As such, 'Pentecostals on the Copperbelt express very little hope or dread or expectation in the eschaton – indeed, they give it basically no attention at all' (p19). Here, the present is not expanded by ancient

and futuristic signs, but remains steadfastly – and, in temporal terms, *narrowly* – focused on the here-and-now of pies, cars, dresses, furniture, and husbands (p18, 21). Indeed, in a revealing section of the article which describes local reactions to two crises (the killing of Nsofu man, and the global crash in copper prices), Haynes states how:

Pentecostals in Nsofu did not connect these small or big crises to a coming apocalypse. Instead, they turned their attention to prayer and “spiritual warfare,” commanding an immediate end to Satan’s activities in this life... Nsofu Pentecostals therefore foreshorten the horizon of Christian expectation considerably, focusing the possibility of divine intervention on the here-and-now, rather than the end of time (p19-20).

How, then, can ‘a Christian future that is radically foreshortened’ (p22) provide the temporal content necessary to fill an expansive present? Can a temporal foreshortening really be a type of temporal expansion? For Pentecostals for whom ‘the distant promise of eternity [has] lost much of its attraction’ (p21), it is difficult to see how this might be the case, relinquishing, as it does, the opportunity to populate an enlarged present with one of the most baroque and time-consuming (literally and figuratively) of theological concerns, namely, eschatology.

Tellingly, using the past to populate the expansive present appears equally awkward for Haynes’ informants. Here, a futurist temporal retraction into the present curtails the past by pressing it into exclusive servitude to current happenings and concerns, ‘thereby making the past and present contemporary, occupying the same timespace’ (p14). Here, again, we see an evacuation-giving-way-to-abolition, this time of ancient biblical history, with the present dissolving the past into its very presentism. Moreover, this timespace remains *unexpanded* insofar as the past is experienced presently by precluding it from simultaneously being possessed by figures from the past; ‘2012 is *my* season of distinction and rest, not Moses’s’ (p10). Here, the past does not expand the present, but is co-opted by it, and therefore excluded from it. As such, the past, too, is like a pie – to be enjoyed *now*, or not at all.

In Haynes’ engagement with my work among the Brethren of Gamrie, she states that ‘dispensationalist theology condenses time’ but ‘does not eliminate the distinction between the

present and the expected apocalyptic future' (p24), explaining this using the metaphor of the movements of a swimmer which keep a floating ball just out of reach. This metaphor is problematic, since, for the Christians of Gamrie, eschatological waiting does not (simultaneously) preclude apocalyptic arrival. Dispensationalist time in Gamrie is not condensed, nor does it maintain a strict distinction between the apocalyptic present and the apocalyptic future. Instead, Gamrie dispensationalism lays claim over *all time* by conjoining past, present and future – not via a dissolution into presentism (which I have argued is far from expansive), but via a millenarian temporal coalescence which allows pies to be kept in the past, *and* eaten now, *and* saved for later. In Gamrie, 'biblical times' and 'the last days' (p29) are never 'out of reach' (p24), for they run in parallel with the present.

A final comment on capitalist and Christian time. Even if a dogmatic interpretation of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (whereby capitalist time *is* Protestant time) has its pitfalls, it nonetheless seems true that Copperbelt Pentecostalism deifies the consumerist logic of late capitalism – a point Haynes partly concedes in footnote 19 (p34-35). Yet what if the logic of capitalism was not just submission, but submission *to* something – namely to immediate gratification? Here, 'Nsofu Pentecostals ask that God himself submit' (p26), just as these Pentecostals submit to the will of capitalism – a will that demands one cultivates the will to eat pie *now*. This being the case, perhaps Weber was right, namely that as capitalism develops, hedonism becomes its own 'ultimate value' or religion. The temporally unexpansive presentism of Copperbelt Prosperity Pentecostalism certainly seems to indicate how this might be the case.

References

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