3 Contextual theology on trial?

African neo-Pentecostalism, sacred authority, gendered constructions, and violent enactions

Chammah J. Kaunda

Introduction

This chapter interrogates how some African neo-Pentecostalism¹ reinforces and legitimises authority² by adopting loosely reinterpreted sacred attributes of traditional African notions of authority that give unquestionable and unaccountable power to their clergy. The chapter argues that this resourcing of power creates an authoritarian atmosphere in which women and girls are rendered vulnerable to sexualised treatment. This is demonstrated by employing two cases of sexual abuse of women and girls by some neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa to stress that inculturation informed by subconscious affirmation of the “Christ of culture”³ that has taken place in some of these churches promotes dangerous forms of authority which have both ignored values of *Ubuntu* and failed to adequately interact with the kenotic authority of Jesus Christ.

The chapter is informed by decolonial⁴ thinking shaped by *Ubuntu*, and refers to a way of being and exercising power informed by recognising the intrinsic relationality and belonging of all creation to each other. Human beings and all creation participate in each other’s existence – “we are because you are, and since you are, therefore, I am”.⁵ The “I am” generates power to be and authority to act from others. This makes “I am” a way of exercising power and a way of acting through radical relationality. *Ubuntu* speaks of a way of generating and exercising power as a relational resource embedded within the community of life (including the living, non-human creation, yet-to-be-born, ancestors, divinities and God) for the wellbeing of the community. Authority/power is not a possession of an individual; it is rather a community resource which originates from God. Only God has authority/power, and all creation only participates in God’s authority/power. Vital participation⁶ in God’s life/power is a gift of God to the community of life. Thus, decoloniality seeks to liberate and redesign existing foundational systems of people’s imaginations of power, which have been manipulated and used as religious apparatus of oppression and exploitation, by subjecting them to kenotic imaginations. It also seeks to transform indigenous ideals and aspirations inherent in cultural heritage by reclaiming

life-giving elements and rejecting elements that do not promote the fullness of life for all. Traditionally, power has been viewed as the possession of the powerful and privileged. In contrast, this chapter seeks to rearticulate power from the experiences of those on the margins, in order to kenotise and decolonise principles on which reigning neo-Pentecostal notions of power are grounded, as well as ideological discourses that authorise practices of power. Thus, decoloniality is not a matter of merely changing frames of thinking and approaches to neo-Pentecostal notions of power. Rather, it is a critical approach to kenotising and decolonising the way power is articulated and practised in order to promote a decolonial kenotic articulation of relational meanings of power based on experiences of the margins.⁷

The chapter argues that the uncritical inculturation of traditional concepts of authority/power within neo-Pentecostalism is a critical factor in shaping local contextual forces such as social, relational, gender, sexuality,⁸ economic, political, and cultural. There is a need to interrogate the religious paradox within neo-Pentecostalism which simultaneously rejects and uncritically perpetuates core elements of traditional cultural forms of authority while not adequately interacting with the kenotic authority of Jesus Christ. Kenosis is engaged using a decolonial approach, as too often the concept has also unwittingly been utilised to promote subordination of women and girls. I shall demonstrate how from the perspective of decoloniality, kenosis could help to challenge some misconceptions, such as the view that authority is identical with coercive power, male dominance, and the prophet's sole access to the divine, as something that the clergy possess, and that is enforceable through top-down interactions in which the laity is reduced to a spiritual clientele. The chapter suggests a life-affirming decolonial kenotic theology of authority which is boundary-crossing from the centre to the margins, from spiritual to material, from divine to human, and/or from power into powerlessness and vulnerability, whereby the pastor is emptied of human authority for the sake of the marginalised.

On the sacred: a definition

In a search to interrogate the misuse of authority in some African neo-Pentecostalism, the first step is to understand the African traditional notions of sacred authority. I follow David Chidester's definition of the sacred as

that which is set apart from the ordinary, everyday rhythms of life, but set apart in such a way that it stands at the center of community formation. In between the radical transcendence of the sacred and the social dynamics of the sacred, we find ongoing mediations, at the intersections of personal subjectivity and social collectivities, in which anything can be sacralized through the religious work of intensive interpretation, regular ritualization, and inevitable contestation over ownership of the means, modes, and forces for producing the sacred.⁹

If we accept Chidester's delineation of "the sacred", then the concept of sacred authority does not need to be limited to any specific religion. As Tinyiko Maluleke stresses, "Nor, then, should we confine the concept of the religious to the four walls of religious institutions".¹⁰ In African religious heritage, religious leaders, as set apart by ancestors and divinities, have been at the centre of community formations. Metaphysically and epistemologically, African ontologies are inhospitable to dichotomies such as those between God and creation, the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual, the individual and the community, and so on. In the absence of such dichotomies, there is no sharp distinction between secular authority and spiritual authority.¹¹ Authority is rooted in the meanings and interpretations underpinned by an African spiritual heritage. However, the notions of power/authority are not simple or monolithic, but rather embrace all aspects of human experiences. Most African people believe in the spiritual significance of all human authority, whether political or religious.¹² Spirituality cannot be removed from the experience of most African people in considering any type of authority/power, especially religious authority, which is a focus of this chapter.

African feminist theologians have lamented over how African spirituality and authority easily get entangled within gendered relations of power.¹³ For example, and as demonstrated in the following case studies, in some parts of Africa, Christian women have been forced to define their sex and sexuality from the perspective of being the causers and *loci* of sin. In worse cases, coercing women to subordinate their sexual desires to their male counterparts is perceived as a form of purification from sin.¹⁴ African feminists resist regarding authority as neutral. For them, neutrality is hardly part of any form of religious authority. Some African notions of authority are well-springs of patriarchy and abysses in which women and girls groan in pain. Thus, African feminist theologians, although they regard African religious heritage as a critical source for creating theology, have nevertheless rejected uncritical retrieval of every element of African religio-cultural heritage, as too often these have reinforced and perpetuated patriarchy in many African churches.¹⁵ As I shall demonstrate in what follows, Christian patriarchy has found fertile ground within African Christianity, in which the dialogue between Christian and traditional patriarchies now informs a certain type of male hegemony which replicates itself through ecclesiastical spaces in many parts of Africa.¹⁶

The coming of Christianity has not changed the predisposition toward non-dichotomisation of sacred authority and secular authority among African Christians.¹⁷ As a way of life, the African religio-cultural worldview lays the foundation for collective African consciousness, which continues, albeit in a modified or loosely reinterpreted form, to shape the understanding, interpretations, and conception of reality of many African people. In contemporary African neo-Pentecostalism, these African religious imaginations function in the interstices between continuity and discontinuity in

terms of their notions of authority.¹⁸ This means that while many Africans have converted to new religious traditions, their notions of authority have not been converted. In fact, the word appears to have been reinforced by biblical conceptions of spiritual power.¹⁹ Various scholars studying African religions and Christianity in different parts of the continent have noted that key elements of traditional African notions of authority remain salient, resilient, and deeply entrenched in African Christian imaginations.²⁰ However, it must be acknowledged that traditional African notions of authority cannot easily be assigned to the whole of African neo-Pentecostalism; rather, it is possible to identify some salient characteristics that influence and shape their gender and sexual relations.²¹

If theology as critical reflection on the missio-political praxis of the church is contextual in character, such that historical and cultural context is a factor in experiencing and articulating Christian faith, then to understand the religious foundation of neo-Pentecostal notions of power we have to turn to the religio-cultural heritage. This religio-cultural heritage can give us some clues to help us understand the cultural psychology that is at work in African Pentecostalism.

The world of sacred authority

On the question of continuity and discontinuity between neo-Pentecostalism and African religious notions of sacred authority, many scholars are increasingly affirming both continuity and discontinuity in varying degrees.²² In *Worlds of Power*, Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar demonstrate that most Africans believe “power has its ultimate origin in the spirit world”.²³ Gerrie Ter Haar, in *How God Became African*, observes how some Africans (including politicians) seek to manipulate mystical powers to increase their vital force.²⁴ She believes that the spiritual realm affords one of the most accessible and strategic forms of power for many African leaders. The source of power for most neo-Pentecostals is the spirit world. For instance, Asonzeh Ukah, in the article “Obeying Caesar to Obey God”, observes that “charismatic authentication or the legitimization of Pentecostal authority is central to understanding the organisational behaviour of Pentecostal associations in Africa, as well as their” gender and sexual relations.²⁵ Ukah concludes (in keeping with an African understanding of the ultimate source of power and authority) that “the source of Pentecostal authority is, therefore, anchored on a non-human, suprahuman, supraprimate entity”.²⁶ Thus, Ogbu Kalu, in *African Pentecostalism*, accentuates that:

African Pentecostalism is an important dimension of Africans’ attraction to pneumatic expressions of the gospel that resonates with the power theme in indigenous religions, the power that sustained the cosmos, the socioeconomic and political structures, the power that gave

meaning to life's journey from birth through death, and the sojourn in the ancestral world reincarnated and return to the world.²⁷

He perceives contemporary African Pentecostalism as "another phase of the quest for power and identity in Africa".²⁸ Perhaps this is what scholars such as Birgit Meyer have described as "Africanization from below" – the inculturation practices of grassroots neo-Pentecostalism.²⁹ However, for African neo-Pentecostalism the main point of convergence with African religious heritage is not the devil, as Meyer argues, but rather the theme of spiritual power. Allan Anderson wonders "whether African Pentecostal churches conceive of the Holy Spirit's power in a biblical sense, thus transforming traditional power concepts, or whether continuity is maintained by giving traditional power concepts a 'Christian' guise".³⁰

Neo-Pentecostal notions of authority arise out of historical and cultural power grounded in the traditional African religious cosmological frameworks. It is a reinterpretation of this framework which shapes specific neo-Pentecostal notions of relationship, gender, and sexuality.³¹ To put it another way, the concepts of authority arise out of the African understanding of being bound together in an inseparable reality – physical and spiritual, individual and community, women and men, humanity and creation, the living and the dead, and God and creation.³² In short, African religious imaginations provide the basic framework for both conceptualisation and interpretation of how contemporary African neo-Pentecostals understand authority. Jacob Olupona, one of the most prominent scholars of indigenous African religions, stresses that "religious worldviews, often unique to distinct ethnic groups, reflect people's identities and lie at the heart of how they relate to one another, to other people, and to the world at large".³³ He further argues that these religious worldviews encode, as well as influence, the collective values and shared knowledge of each particular ethnic group. The religious framework, therefore, constitutes the foundation upon which the meaning of authority and power is established. In other words, authority cannot be conceived without reference to religion. Authority is spiritual in character – it originates from God/gods.³⁴

In African spiritual systems, authority is an attribute of God which human beings access through the mediatory role of ancestors.³⁵ The mystical source of authority forms the foundation of religious imaginations for the majority of African people, an element which has found a safe modern haven within African neo-Pentecostalism. The traditional priest is perceived as "a representative, a bearer of power, a hand used by power", the eyes of the gods.³⁶ He is inseparable from ancestors and the gods. His words are received and revered as words *from* and *of* ancestors, and the words of the ancestors are in essence the words of God/gods. Violating them is not only defying the authority of the ancestors and God/gods, but a breach in the cosmological balance.³⁷ In many cases, this incurs misfortune. Similarly, contemporary neo-Pentecostal religious leaders locate themselves as

the embodiment of sacred authority. Their authority, derived from the call of God, is legitimised through demonstrating that they have secret access to sacred knowledge. In a study conducted among Pentecostals in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Katrien Pye established that many members of Pentecostal churches are persuaded that their pastors have unlocked or unmasked the secret of sacred knowledge.³⁸ The act of being called by God brings the pastor into a mystical union with the Holy Spirit. There is a belief that the pastors in a mysterious way function as conduits through which the power of the Holy Spirit flows to reach their congregants.³⁹ In the traditional context, people believe that the power of the ancestors is embodied in the priest, who acts as the union of spiritual and physical power in his body and personality. The belief has been adapted in its loosely reinterpreted form in some neo-Pentecostalism in which pastors are increasingly perceived as sacred authorities who are unlike other people; in their person and being, they are mystical beings, sacred vessels of God.⁴⁰ In heterogendered contexts, this kind of authority, coupled with literal biblical interpretation, figuratively and literally makes women vulnerable to patriarchal oppression and sexualised treatment. The kind of authority that neo-Pentecostal leaders command over their members, as discussed previously, seems to sanction gendered and sexual violence against women and girls.

On account of being the embodiment of the secret knowledge from the Holy Spirit, the pastors are perceived as sacred, and are feared and approached with reverence in much the same way as the traditional priests. This means the more pastors exercise unrestrained power over their members, the more women and girls become easily sexualised, and the more patriarchal pastors establish a broader unjust alliance between spirituality and the sexualisation of women's bodies and sexualities. The pastors are regarded not as ordinary beings, but rather as those occupying a special office, and representing a visible link between the spiritual realm and the natural world. In this way, they appear to exercise indirect pneumatocratic influence over their followers. Their being, knowledge, and activities are presented to their members as shrouded in mysteries of the Holy Spirit. This could be described as a theo/pneumatocratic-complex, a situation whereby pastors unwittingly take the place of God/the Holy Spirit as his representatives in the everyday affairs of their members. The contemporary African neo-Pentecostal exercise of power has increasingly encouraged a blurring of the lines between the pastor and the Holy Spirit.

In the neo-Pentecostal scheme of things, it is difficult to distinguish between the pastor and the Holy Spirit. Pastors are feared because it is believed that whatever they proclaim comes to pass. Thus, the neo-Pentecostal religious leaders' source of authority is, as it were, removed to a mystical dimension, and the leaders themselves are perceived as sacred beings beyond human criticism.⁴¹ In the context where individuals are increasingly perceived as "spiritual systems" in themselves, members have tended to relinquish their autonomy and personal subjectivity and power to their pastors in their

quest for spiritual solutions. Thus, within most neo-Pentecostal churches, there is a great disproportion between the pastor as medium of Holy Spiritual power and members as beneficiaries of such power. Members too often are subjected to theologies of personal disempowerment which render them manipulatable and too docile to engage their pastors in life-giving ways of exercising spiritual power. Since sex is usually utilised as a tool of power, in such heteropatriarchal contexts with unconstrained exercise of power, women and girls are the most vulnerable. Whereas traditional priestly authority was embedded in mystery, scholars underline that the system also ensured checks and balances. This was done through continuous critique of the system by the presence of ancestors, and through revision and transformation by human symbolic actions through ritual performances.⁴² The people perform these rituals as a social mechanism to critique and revise outdated aspects of cultural traditions by reconstructing them within collectivist personhood. This *Ubuntu*-isation process ensures development of “new ways of being and becoming so that social healing can follow in the community”.⁴³ Catherine Bell underlines that “rituals did not simply restore social equilibrium, they were part of the ongoing process by which the community was continually redefining and renewing itself”.⁴⁴ However, within African neo-Pentecostalism with its “big human” or superhuman centred structure, members are powerless to critique or revise the mystical powers of the Holy Spirit embodied in the pastor.⁴⁵

The overemphasis on the mysterious source of neo-Pentecostal authority makes the systems vulnerable to, manipulatable by, and abusive of power. The neo-Pentecostal spiritual system does not provide an adequate mechanism to help prevent abuse of power. As demonstrated in the following case studies, the pastoral exercise of sacred power is not constrained by proper checks and balances in this religious moral system.

On gender and sexual relations: two case studies

There are countless sexual scandals in contemporary African neo-Pentecostalism. This ranges from pastors who suck single women’s breasts to exorcise them of demons to pastors who claim to be commanded by the Holy Spirit to have sexual intercourse with married women together with their daughters.⁴⁶ Thus, to limit my discussion, I focus on two prominent cases in South Africa.

The case of Omotoso

On 20 April 2017, a Nigerian televangelist Timothy Omotoso was arrested on 22 counts of “human trafficking, sexual assault and the rape of young girls”.⁴⁷ Omotoso is the founder and senior pastor of Jesus Dominion International with branches across South Africa, the United Kingdom, France and Nigeria. It was alleged that he was grooming young people and sexually

abusing girls as young as 14. He was accused of raping over 30 young women who testified in court to their experiences. The pastor coerced young girls to massage his phallus, and then had intercourse with them without condoms. After the act, he recited Psalm 51 and prayed.⁴⁸

Sarojini Nadar, in her reflection on Omotoso's trial, argues:

the problem is not regulation of churches – the problem is the *regulated teachings* within the churches which socialise girls and women to submit to male authority; which promote what the SACC calls the “family fabric” which is ostensibly a heteronormative – “daddy-mommy” family and takes no account of the ways in which power is exerted in harmful ways within families.⁴⁹

She believes that “Timothy Omotoso is not the leader of a ‘cult’ – he is not part of a lunatic fringe – but that Omotosos exist in all of your churches, because your teachings allow and promote the existence of Omotosos”.⁵⁰ She underlines that

there are thousands of Omotosos in this country alone, and that they too are happy to read Psalm 51 after they perpetrate their acts of manipulation, coercion and, ultimately, violence through their invitations to young submissive victims, schooled in your “BC” (biblically correct) teachings and not “PC” (politically correct) teachings.⁵¹

Nadar points out that “a young girl who subscribes to these Christian teachings is at greater risk of coercion, manipulation, and pressure because she has been socialised to submit to male authority, and she witnesses a church where men and women don't share equally in authority”.⁵² For Nadar,

teachings which promote abstinence instead of consent, “bodily belonging” instead of “bodily autonomy”, and modesty codes for women instead of “thou shalt not touch” codes for men, make it difficult to talk about power and male entitlement in the church.⁵³

“As long as churches remain environments where men have all the power”, she stresses, “then church leaders can use their authority to groom and control women. Patriarchal culture that is steeped in Christian teachings creates conditions that make abuse possible”.⁵⁴ Nadar concludes, “The ‘biblically-sanctioned’ teachings that encourage and teach power differentials between genders is what made the Omotoso case possible”.⁵⁵ Omotoso was regarded as a spiritual father by his congregants. The spiritual father plays a similar role to that of the traditional father. In most African patriarchal cultures, the father controls the affairs of the home.⁵⁶ Elsewhere, we have demonstrated how Zambian neo-Pentecostals have equated ecclesiastical spaces to a home where the pastor is regarded as the father of the members.⁵⁷ This

inculturation of the church into a home is problematic on many levels. In some traditional societies, African women have argued that home discourse is a dangerous ideology for women and girls. They stress that the home discourse was based on conservative traditional African cultural heritage, in which culture and spirituality intertwined and placed women at the centre of the ritual in order to domesticate their sex and sexuality for male gratification and reduce them to objects for procreation.⁵⁸

The case of Seven Angels

The second story is similar to the first. In February 2018, the leaders of the Mancoba Seven Angels Ministry⁵⁹ were accused of masterminding the killing of police officers and a retired army officer inside the police station in Ngcobo, a small town in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The police suspected the seven Mancoba brothers of murder and stealing guns from the police station before blowing up two automated teller machines (ATMs). A search at the church premises led to a shootout between the police and the alleged criminals, and the deaths of three of the Mancoba brothers.⁶⁰ The church was established in 1986 by the father of the seven brothers, Sphiwo Mancoba, in Umzimkhulu, KwaZulu-Natal. It was initially called “Angel”, an acronym for All Nations God’s Evangelical Lamp. Shortly after his death in April 2015, his seven sons refused to succeed him as leaders of the church, choosing instead to break away and form Seven Angels Ministry, which would be overseen by their mother. The church resisted secular education and employment outside of the church as doctrines of devil worship. Members of the ministry were required to relinquish all of their wealth as gifts to the “Angel Brothers” upon joining the congregation. As a result, in 2016, the church appeared before the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) to answer to allegations of commercialisation, abuse, and exploitation of people’s beliefs.⁶¹ One of the brothers told the CRL Rights Commission that they were “angels coming from heaven” and not mere humans who should obey the national constitution. He accentuated, “we are saying as Seven Angelic Ministries, firstly I am not a pastor; I am an angel from heaven, seated at the right of the father”.⁶²

The church refused to cooperate with the CRL Rights Commission. It was only the shootout that granted the police access to the church premises. The National Police Commissioner confirmed that “not less than 100” young women and girls between the ages of 12 and 25 were rescued.⁶³ These girls and young women were “indoctrinated and brainwashed”⁶⁴ and reduced to sex slaves. Besides their wives, the Mancoba brothers, “who saw themselves as angels sent by God”,⁶⁵ indoctrinated many women in their church into sexual submission. The church considered providing the Mancoba brothers with sexual satisfaction as an honourable service to God. It was reported that “In this church it is forbidden to have identity

documents. Children are not allowed to have birth certificates and they are not allowed to attend school”.⁶⁶

These two cases demonstrate how culturally-shaped masculinities are enforced and policed through neo-Pentecostalism – “with a view to the maintenance not only of a general system of male supremacy, but the continuation of a particular type of hegemonic male supremacy: the heterosexual type”.⁶⁷ The traditional beliefs and practices which sacralise religious leaders were uncritically adopted and utilised as instruments to legitimise and maintain the distinctiveness of angels from the laity. In fact, adopting the title “angels” is intimately tied up with contextual worldview and cultural contingencies in which traditional priests often adopt mysterious names as instruments of legitimisation. This perception of religious leaders in mystical terms contributes to abusing religious authority, especially in a neo-Pentecostal context in which the spiritual authority of ancestors who mercilessly punished wrongdoing has been replaced wholesale by the Holy Spirit – regarded as a gentle, merciful, and forgiving Spirit. Thus, most neo-Pentecostal religious leaders, as in the two cases discussed in this chapter, are increasingly perceiving themselves as having unlocked access to unlimited sacred power, which is too often abused due to lack of adequate structures of accountability.⁶⁸

It is not just the biblical teaching at the core of gender and sexual relations of power, but rather the way the process of organic inculturation has taken place, that has weakened traditional African spiritual systems. Just as male African theologians, in their process of formulating a theology of liberation deeply rooted in African cultures, normalised and essentialised male experiences as African experiences,⁶⁹ the neo-Pentecostal leaders have normalised male experiences. Some elements of African religio-cultural heritage which nurture and perpetuate heteropatriarchy have been comprehensively adopted in contemporary neo-Pentecostal Christianity.⁷⁰ Hence, there is a need for constant engagement in theological dialogue, first in order to draw afresh life-giving conceptions of sacred authority, and second to develop viable ways of exercising sacred authority that promote and enable the full humanity of women and children, and the integrity of all creation.

Decolonial kenotic theology of authority

The need for decolonial kenotic theology of authority arises out of the understanding that neo-Pentecostalism has uncritically inculturated a patriarchal reading of the concepts of traditional authority into its religious system. Elsewhere, we have demonstrated how this uncritical and subconscious inculturation of traditional concepts of authority has reproduced and accelerated gendered constructions and violent enactions in some neo-Pentecostal churches such as those in the two cases discussed in this chapter.⁷¹ In my research among Zambian neo-Pentecostals, I demonstrated how, through their subconscious organic process of inculturating Christianity in African

cultures, neo-Pentecostals have adopted a superficial and naïve reading of traditional authority, ignored ideas of *Ubuntu*, and excluded the experiences of women, or rather, sexualised their being and bodies.⁷² In the ever-evolving neo-Pentecostal elitist culture embedded in African cultural and Christian theologies, which are both informed by patriarchal imaginations, women and their bodies are increasingly consigned to having a completely obliterated self, which makes them vulnerable to the disempowering effects of religio-normativity as explained in the cases discussed in this chapter. As established, the dominant and accepted praxis of authority within most neo-Pentecostals continues to reproduce and perpetuate heteropatriarchal patterns of male control and women's subordination in both homes and churches. There is a continuation of heteropatriarchal imaginations in the value systems of Christian faith and traditional religious heritage. This describes a situation in which a new religious system has not only emerged but has also redefined asymmetric social relations of power between the pastor and laity. This has made neo-Pentecostal beliefs and practices in relation to gender and sexuality a locus for enunciation and reproduction of sexualised theo/pneumatocratic-complexes which continually manifest in gender- and sex-based violence perpetuated by pastors.

As a solution, I am proposing authority rooted in decolonial kenosis. Kenosis comes from κενώω (*kenoō*, "I empty, make empty"), and, in Philippians 2:7, refers to Christ's self-emptying in the incarnation, which is a realisation and praxis of the divine authority within the flesh. Because God took on embodied existence, the flesh becomes an ever-potential site of manifesting and demonstrating the attributes of God such as love, justice, mercy, hospitality, equality etc.⁷³ In this perspective, Christ's power was demonstrated in kenosis – the power to empty himself. In so doing, Christ highlighted the margins of society as the reason for divine authority – the women, lepers, children, tax collectors, the sick, poor, and those who are marginalised and vulnerable. He crossed the divine-human borders that were artificially created through sin. This has nothing to do with giving ontological privilege to the marginalised in their relationship with God over and above other human beings; rather, it is a conviction based on radical affirmation that Jesus, through kenosis, is on a divine mission of emptying divine justice and full dignity into the marginalised even as the marginalised themselves participate in their own struggle alongside God.

In the older Jewish paradigm of priesthood (similar to the traditional African model), it was the human priest who crossed the spiritual borders to represent the religious community before God. This paradigm promoted a clear distinction between the priest and the worshipping community. The priest was a special mediatory figure who bridged the gap between God and the community of worshippers. He alone had access to the secret sacred knowledge of God, whereas, in the new paradigm inaugurated with the incarnation of Jesus, God, in the person of Christ, crossed the divine borders, not to represent God but to dialogue with humanity. This act of crossing borders radically overcame the dichotomy between God and

humanity/all creation, and between the priest and the community of faith – described as the priesthood of all believers. God and human are no longer separated, but rather are in dialogue. The incarnation collapsed the dichotomy as God emptied Godself into humanity and humanity into God without losing the distinction. Jesus was fully God, fully human (John 1:1, 20:28; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:11–13), identical to God and humanity. This means that God is human, Jesus Christ, and the human is also God – Jesus is very God and very human, both natures “unconfused and unmixed, but also unseparated and undivided, in the one person of this Messiah and Saviour”.⁷⁴

Jesus’ power was not only in what he could do for others, but in what he could make out of himself – the power to empty himself in order to become like sinful humans. However, it was also the power to resist being co-opted into sin and becoming a sinner. Through his temptations (Matthew 4:1–11), Jesus refused to associate himself with the powerful and the rich – the global colonialist – the devil and his imperialist extensions manifested through human elitists of his day – the religious leaders and Roman powers. He introduced a paradigm for reinterpreting power and authority, in a way that was not only about service, but about a power which is devoid of self – the power to restore humanity to its authentic humanity in mutual dialogue with the divine. The fundamental objective of the union between human and divine in Jesus was the promotion of greater social justice and restoration of human dignity. The divine in Christ embraces humanity in Christ while transcending it – not giving in to temptation to sin.

However, while *kenosis* provides a vital conversation partner, it is important to also underline that, nonetheless, the seeming humility in *kenosis* has not insulated against facilitating human perception of divine relationality as “power over”, in turn supporting a divine metaphysics of power as domination or hierarchical.⁷⁵ Feminist theologians have argued that *kenosis* is anything but an innocent concept. As already argued, in most African societies and churches, *kenosis* is culturally interpreted and women are expected to sacrifice their needs, concerns, and sexualities in order to appease and tame the violent tendencies of patriarchy.⁷⁶ This makes *kenosis* a dangerous concept which requires a cautious approach through reimagining neo-Pentecostal ecclesiastical spaces in decolonial terms. In short, since the *kenotic* vision is vulnerable to misinterpretation and corruption, it needs to dialogue with critical theories such as decoloniality.

Gianni Vattimo perceives *kenosis* as the inauguration of secularisation through de-socialisation. For Vattimo, *kenosis* – as a process of secularisation – undoes the violence not only of metaphysics, but also of religion. Through incarnation, God has moved out of eternity and into spatial temporality. He sees *kenosis* as God’s abasement from the position of master of humanity to being its friend (John 15:15).⁷⁷ Vattimo believes that *kenosis* as secularisation is a process of emancipation and liberation through weakening strong structures such as religions or metaphysics, for at the core of both is

violence, because they privilege God or religious systems at the expense of the margins and marginalised.⁷⁸ There is a way in which Vattimo's kenosis could be regarded as reductionist. Kenosis interpreted from an African perspective could be regarded as God "striking an intricate balance" between eternity and spatial temporality; between God and humanity; between God and creation; between the spiritual and material; between the religious and secular, etc. It is God taking on *Ubuntu*. God demonstrates that God is because we are, and because we are, God is. God demonstrates that power is embedded in the quest for balance of forces. Power is generated as *Ubuntu* – promoting empowering and liberating power within the relational nexus⁷⁹ in which the humanity of all is affirmed through shared inclusivist power. This is not the power over, but rather power with others – power in just socio-relational actions. Kenosis as God taking on *Ubuntu* resists both secularisation and sacralisation of power/authority. Jesus through his incarnation reconfigured and relocated all powers that have a direct effect on the community of life, including supernatural powers, within the realm that promotes full accountability to humanity and non-human creation. For Kwame Bediako, this approach to kenosis affirms the continuation of the African world as a spiritually animated reality but functioning with configured powers in which all the various forms of human leadership have undergone *Ubuntu*-isation.⁸⁰ Bediako underlines the incarnation of Jesus, which reflects a dynamic encounter between God and creation; this relationship was a form of radical accountability and served as a divine witness and the witness of creation to justice and equality for all. He believes that this approach to power is critical for subverting dictatorial and absolutist claims that seem to be inherent in contemporary African neo-Pentecostalism.

Thus, decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to maintain balance between the pastor and the community of faith, based on the critical pillars of justice and human rights. It is power in sound and just relationships. The power of the pastor is generated within and for just relationships. The humanity of the pastor is bound up within the humanity of his/her congregants. The power of God is that power which empowers the community of faith to live justly, to act justly, and to affirm the humanity of all. The pastor is not distinct from the community of faith. The pastor is first and foremost a member of the community of faith. The pastor is a sinful person, just like the rest of the community of faith. This is important, as it has been proved that any artificial separation between the pastor and the members can easily lead to the pastors usurping the place of God as they increasingly become absorbed with demonstrating their spiritual gymnastics and claiming to have unlocked the secret to divine knowledge. Decolonial kenotic theology of authority rejects sacralisation of any human being and resists perceiving any human as possessing authority – all authority/power belongs to God alone. It focuses instead on the mutual empowerment of the pastor and the marginalised, in the struggle to actualise the fullness of life in Jesus Christ (John 10:10).

Decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to empty human authority of its mysteriousness through the work of the Holy Spirit, who, through spiritual gifts, distributes power as he pleases, and thus to relocate all powers only in God. Spiritual gifts are the various measures of divine power/grace by which Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, enables the community of believers to participate effectively in God's mission in the world. The act of distribution of these gifts by the Holy Spirit means that power is not located in mysterious dimensions, but rather within God as manifested in the community of faith. These gifts are measured by the operation of divine power in each member of the faith community. This means that no single individual possesses all the power, but that each participates in a portion of God's grace. Only Jesus has all the power in heaven and on earth, in which believers participate through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is through all believers' equal participation in the power of the Holy Spirit that an individual is emptied of claiming more access to God than others. Since the Holy Spirit distributes gifts as he pleases, access to the power is not necessarily derived from the Holy Spirit directly, but from one another, since the power has already been distributed. This is a radical emptying of the spiritual dimensions of power, which is divided among believers. It is also important to note that each gift depends on other gifts, which essentially means that other gifts are given so that a community of faith has clear internal mechanisms of accountability. When applied to the pastor, the pastor is a facilitator whose authority is a measured gift of the Holy Spirit which does not receive its legitimisation in some mysterious dimension, but rather in fulfilling its function by serving the common good. It also means that the office is accountable to all other spiritual gifts for its proper functioning.

As Nimi Wariboko argues, a prophetic lifestyle is all about participating in Jesus' incarnation among, and living in radical solidarity with, the marginalised people and allowing their indignation to nourish⁸¹ decolonial kenotic authority. Leadership in postcolonial Africa is always about crossing the long-standing legacies of colonial borders in order to touch people at the core of their humanity. Thus, decolonial kenotic theology of authority "must not only be anchored to the history of injustice, discrimination, and suffering, but must also be grounded in a vision of love, hope, equity, and justice to facilitate the responsible new alternatives and lean toward the unexpected".⁸² Decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to kenotise and decolonise minds and subjectivities by giving hope and promoting confidence among women and girls to struggle for a possible life-giving socio-relational order which reflects the intention of God for his good creation.

For, as Jesus states in Matthew 28:18, "all authority in heaven and on earth is given to me". Bediako reminds us that these "words are in the context of post-resurrection appearances of our Lord, and hence come from the realm of 'spirit-power'. In an Africa which understands authority and power as emanating from the transcendent realm, the words make full sense".⁸³ However, these words also mean that no one possesses any authority in

heaven or on earth, except through participation in Christ. It also means that power can only be exercised in the same way Christ himself demonstrated through crossing borders of segregation between God and creation, the spiritual and material, the divine and humanity, and so on. Any failure, such as those that could be seen in the case studies discussed in this chapter, is a clear indication that the powers have fallen – and according to Walter Wink, all fallen powers are demonic;⁸⁴ thus, they must be held accountable. The way of Jesus constitutes a new, alternative use of authority in the world, overridden by Roman and religious oppression and exploitation. According to the Gospels, Jesus understood power in terms of marginality, that is, the power to humanise the marginalised, the power to side with the dehumanised, the power to heal and deliver the oppressed, the power to sacrifice his life for others, the power to forgive sin, the power to serve and not to be served, the power to promote justice and equality for all. His understanding of power culminated in his death on the cross, where he *Ubuntu*-ised all power and authority. It is on the cross where he stripped all powers at every level of human society – “stripped them of any pretensions to ultimacy”.⁸⁵ And as Bediako concludes, through his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that “authority truly belongs only to God”.⁸⁶

In this way, decolonial kenotic theology of authority seeks to articulate a shared inclusivist notion of authority that considers the neo-colonial context in which most women and girls remain disempowered and are easily manipulated to sexually empty themselves in order to survive or because of ignorance. In this context, interpretations of authority should be based on the continuous experiences of legacies of colonialism that shape the margins of African societies. Decolonial kenotic theology of authority is opposed to the paradigm of domination and the paradigm of a distinction between the pastor and his/her congregation. In this model, authority undergoes a radical shift from a pastor-centred spirituality to a marginalised-centred spiritual conception of emptied selves, others, and the world. It argues that, like Jesus, authentic religious leadership is about converting into the likeness of the marginalised. Decolonial kenotic theology of authority refuses to collaborate with any form of patriarchy – especially with the interpretations of God as a male who through the process of incarnation empties himself into marginalised flesh, especially female flesh. This view of God disempowers women to resist their sexualisation and objectification.⁸⁷ Thus, decolonial kenotic theology of authority is a radical refusal to take the place of God in the exercise of power, and a conscious embracing of continuous self-kenosis.⁸⁸

Conclusion

The chapter has employed kenotic imagination as a decolonial analytical tool to interrogate the cultural and historical root of contemporary manifestations of “authority” in African neo-Pentecostalism in relation to gendered constructions and violent enactments. It has argued that, with

Christianity now deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural landscape in much of sub-Saharan Africa, and neo-Pentecostalism playing a prominent role in this development, these are potential shapers of public notions of authority. It has demonstrated that neo-Pentecostal notions of authority are contributing to shaping local contextual forces, such as social, economic, political, and cultural factors. Through kenotic decolonial thinking, it has become clear that neo-Pentecostalism functions with a religious paradox in that they simultaneously reject and uncritically perpetuate some core elements of traditional cultural forms of authority. The pastors in these churches reinforce and legitimise their authority by adopting sacred attributes that give them unquestionable and unaccountable power, thereby creating an almost authoritarian atmosphere in which women and children are easily manipulated and subjected to sexualised treatment. Through the two cases presented of sexual abuse of women and children by neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa, the chapter stressed that this inculturated form of authority is dangerous to the wellbeing of women and girls, as it has not adequately interacted with the kenotic authority of Jesus Christ. A decolonial kenotic theology of authority is proposed to challenge some misconceptions, such as the view that authority is identical with coercive power, male dominance, and access to the divine, that it is something that the pastor alone possesses, and that it is enforceable through top-down interactions in which the laity is reduced to a spiritual clientele. The chapter concludes that decolonial kenotic theology of authority is boundary-crossing from the centre to the margins, from the spiritual to the material, from the divine to the human, and/or from power into powerlessness; in this way, the leader participates in Jesus' incarnation among, and is indistinguishable from, his/her congregation in their equal participation in the ultimate source of and sole possessor of all authority in heaven and on earth – Jesus Christ.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, African Pentecostalism refers to neo-Pentecostalism, especially the current phenomenon scholars describe as neo-Propheticism, unless indicated to the contrary.
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