

Exploring Religious Activism in Southern Africa

Workshop, 21 - 22 September 2017

Venue: Room 2-67 in the Graduate Center, University of Pretoria

Organized by Rijk van Dijk, Thomas Kirsch, Franziska Duarte dos Santos and Kim Molenaar

Abstract

We are presently witnessing a new phase in the entanglement between the religious and the political domain on the African continent. Whereas in the first half of the twentieth century African-initiated Christian churches and movements phrased their resistance against political domination and colonial exploitation in religious terms and frameworks of interpretation, we nowadays observe a mutual interweaving of religious and political registers of discourse and practice by activists in southern Africa: Political activists borrow from religious forms and languages while religious activists borrow forms and languages employed in the political domain. Focussing on these processes opens an important field for scholarly inquiry that surprisingly has not received sufficient attention up to now.

Early scholars working in this field have tended to interpret religious movements in southern Africa as a reaction to and protest against colonial rule; others have seen in them evidence for the formation of class-consciousness, while still others have stressed the links between African religious and African nationalist movements after independence. Then, starting from the 1980s, researchers in the field of African-initiated Christianity began to question the idea of 'political protest' as representing the impulse of religious movements, conceptualizing them instead as an expression of resistance *outside* of the political sphere. More recent work, however, has (again) highlighted the role of Christian institutions and their networks as a social space to discuss and perform politics.

In addition, it is well documented in the anthropological literature that Christian organizations in southern Africa have introduced profound reformulations not only of people's beliefs but also with regard to their subjectivities, social relations, personal lifestyles, bodily practices, and 'doing gender'. Faith-based organizations (FBOs), many of whom are involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS or domestic violence, have been playing a key role in community development for quite some time already. While the position of religion in development and the social work of religious actors is hardly a new phenomenon in southern Africa, the present high level of funding through external sources definitely is.

Recent changes in the religious activist landscape are enforced by the growing importance of new communication and media technologies, whose use is increasingly influencing the public domain in unprecedented ways. By allowing activists to reach out to diversified publics on local, regional, national and transnational scales, and by thus enabling them to build up new types of solidarity networks, these developments shape the activists' visions, practices, and identities. A further consequence of this process is an intensified competition between different (religious) institutions for public recognition, media attention, and financial support by donor organizations. All these dimensions need to be considered when trying to come to an understanding of contemporary forms of religious-political activism in southern Africa.

Taking religious-political activism by religious organizations in contemporary southern Africa as the entry-point for an anthropological analysis, this workshop aims at contributing to the emerging ethnographic literature on activism in its present-day manifestations. Among the empirical phenomena to be addressed and discussed in the workshop are the following:

- new social actors and agencies, such as the growing number of FBOs, which increasingly seem to occupy the public domain in terms of formulating their religious agendas of socio-political change;
- new discourses in which socio-religious (re-)formulations of societal relations and socio-political imaginaries of relationships (between the sexes, different generations, different social classes etc.) are being fashioned;
- new forms of mediation and expression, such as through internet, social networks in and through which activists are increasingly capable of positioning themselves, locally as well as internationally;
- religious activists' acts of persuasion in relation to people's everyday lives and political concerns on the micro-, meso- and macro-level.

The workshop, which is organized as a round-table discussion with short presentations by participants, brings together scholars who have done empirical research on (religious) activism in countries of southern Africa and invites them to explore these emergent forms of religious-political engagement with a view to the questions listed above. Over the course of the workshop we seek to exchange and compare empirical insights from different field sites in order to develop a conceptual framework but also to discuss methodological issues and questions of research ethics in this field.