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“THE EMPTIED AUTHORITY”: AFRICAN NEO-PENTECOSTALISM, MODERNISATION OF SACRED AUTHORITY, AND GENDERED AND SEXUALISED CONSTRUCTIONS OF VIOLENCE¹

ABSTRACT

This article argues that African Neo-Pentecostalism has adopted indigenous notions of sacred authority through the paradigm of modernisation. Employing Rev. Timothy Omotoso's case study on sexualisation and gendered exploitation of women and girls in South Africa, the article illustrates that the impact of modernisation is more evident in the individualised, fragmented and fundamentalised way in which Neo-Pentecostalism has resourced indigenous sacred authority. The article proposes emptied sacred authority as life-affirming and the recovery of holistic imaginations, whereby the pastor becomes a symbolic instrument of a kenotic life.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The media have advanced scandalous accusations against sub-Saharan African Neo-Pentecostalism.

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These range from the commercialisation of faith, to pastors who suck single women's breasts as a way of exorcising demons, to pastors who claim to be instructed by the Holy Spirit to have sexual intercourse with married women and their daughters (Akbar 2015). Some pastors spray pesticides such as Doom on their congregants, claiming that such action "cure[s] serious illnesses such as HIV and cancer" (Zaimov 2016). Others instruct their members to eat grass, rats, and snakes, and strip them naked (CRL Rights Commission 2017). This article argues that, if we are to understand this "religious abnormal situation", it is imperative to go down memory lane.

Christianity was introduced in Africa through a framework of modernisation. The late Gambian Christian scholar Lamin Sanneh (1989:172) observes that "[m]issionaries as vernacular agents helped Africans to become modernising agents". In fact, scholars have accentuated Neo-Pentecostalism as a liberating and modernising movement. By contrast, African indigenous religions have been regarded as relics of antique African history vanquished by Christianity (Koschorke 2005; Meyer 1999). However, scholars such as Paul Gifford (2015) have contested the claim that Neo-Pentecostalism is an agent of development and a modernising influence in Africa. They maintain that it is preoccupied with the spirits as primary causality militating against the scientific rationality that underpins modernity. In the Enlightenment thought system, modernisation meant challenging and ultimately overpowering religiously and traditionally informed ways of life in so-called "primitive societies". The expectation was that modernisation would, to a large extent, be marked by a secularisation of the world. However, developments over the past decades have shown that modernisation and sacralisation have taken place synchronously. Nevertheless, the secondary results of modernisation are restricted neither to Western societies nor to secular politics; they have rather impacted on many societies and religious traditions worldwide, including African Neo-Pentecostalism. In an ongoing dialogue between modernisation processes and African Neo-Pentecostalism, influence has not been reciprocal (De Villiers 2018).

The premise of this article is that Neo-Pentecostal churches have adopted indigenous notions of sacred authority through the paradigm of modernisation. It argues that the movement's resistance against secularisation, simultaneously rejecting and subconsciously adopting indigenous beliefs and practices, has engendered a modernised form of sacred authority that shapes hegemonic masculinities among the pastors. As explained in Omotoso's case study on sexualisation and gendered exploitation of women and girls by Neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa, this form of modernisation of sacred authority reinforces and justifies exploitation, sexualisation and domination of women and girls. In fact, as demonstrated in the case study,

the impact of modernisation on Neo-Pentecostalism is more evident in the way in which indigenous sacred authority has been adopted by stripping its indigenous virtues such as communal bondedness, relational justice, and ancestral regulatory spirituality (Kaunda 2018a). As a result, Neo-Pentecostal notions of sacred authority are individualised, unregulated, fundamentalist, unquestionable, unaccountable, and deinstitutionalised. The case study assists in establishing that modernisation has been deployed in the process of resourcing sacred authority and, in turn, created dangerous forms of sacred authority and an authoritarian atmosphere, in which congregants are rendered vulnerable to various forms of spiritual manipulations and sexual abuse. *I do not claim that this expression of sacred authority is representative of African Neo-Pentecostalism as a whole; rather, it is one of the ways in which authority is utilised and could be explained.*

However, in this article, I argue that kenotic sacred authority could assist in challenging some misconceptions and misinterpretations such as the view that authority is identical to coercive power, male dominance, the prophet's sole access to the divine, as something that the clergy alone possesses, and enforceable through top-down interactions in which the laity is reduced to spiritual clientele. The article underlines emptied sacred authority as life-affirming and seeks to reclaim holistic imaginations in which there is no dichotomy between the centre and margins/borders; spiritual and secular; divine and human, and power and powerlessness/vulnerability. The pastor thus becomes a symbolic instrument of a kenotic life. This critical approach seeks to kenotise the way in which sacred authority is articulated and practised, in order to promote a kenotic meaning of an emerging sacred authority based on experiences of the margins.

2. ON THE SACRED AUTHORITY IN THE AFRICAN ONTOLOGICAL PAST

In an endeavour to examine the African Neo-Pentecostal exercise of sacred authority, the first step is to delineate the notions. Chidester (2012:5) outlines 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.

According to this definition, the concept of sacred authority is not confined to any particular religion or religious institution (Maluleke 2018a). In African religious heritage, religious leaders as set apart by ancestors and divinities have been at the centre of community constructions and promotion of the common good. Significantly, African ontologies are inhospitable to dichotomies such as those between God and creation; the natural and the supernatural; the secular and the spiritual; the individual and the community, and so on. In the absence of such dichotomies, the distinction between secular and sacred authority is totally obliterated. As Taylor (2007) indicates, one of the characteristics of indigenous societies is that there is no concept of secular, as social life is holistic and wholly unified. In fact, this total integration between sacred and secular authority caused some Western scholars to regard indigenous societies as incapable of creating just and equitable societies. Yet, this was a mistaken assumption as Luttwak (1994:9-10) describes, a “mistaken Enlightenment prediction that the progress of knowledge and the influence of religion were mutually exclusive”. In indigenous societies, sacred authority is rooted in the meanings and interpretations that underpin Africa’s ontological past – the history of spiritual consciousness (Bediako 1995). The notion of sacred authority is not simple or monolithic; rather, it embraces all aspects of human experiences. Undeniably, many African Neo-Pentecostals believe in the spiritual significance of all human authority, be it political or religious (Kaunda 2018a; 2018b). Spirituality is integrally intertwined with any type of authority, especially religious authority.

The indigenous communities are structured as expressions of the sacred authority and are perceived as embodiments of the sacred authority. Community members, who were set aside for special purposes such as kings, traditional healers and priests, are regarded as entrusted by the ancestors and the entire community to participate in the sacred authority of God for the advancement of abundant life (Magesa 1997; Kaunda 2018a). The communities are unionised with the ancestors in a mysterious way such that the ancestors’ source of power is found in the harmony of the community. The welfare and the prosperity of the community are intricately locked to the ancestors. In short, ancestors are a spiritual source of life for the community, and calamities and natural disasters are mostly linked to the community’s failure to honour them (Magesa 1997; Mathuray 2009). Scholars argue that myths such as taboos, superstitions and prohibitions regarding the origin of the community suggest that Africans understand that much danger is attributed to sacred authority. Mathuray (2009:68) argues that it is

both a symbolic way of preventing abuse of power and a reflection of the humanistic bias of the religious order.

The community constrains the exercise of sacred authority through ancestral checks and balances within the religious moral system. In such religious systems of thought, sacred authority is never a human possession; it is rather a divine possession that flows from God alone through the ancestors into the community and ecological order. All human beings only participate in the life of God. Magesa (1997:35) reminds us that "God is the initiator of the people's way of life, its tradition". The ancestors are significant, because they function as media through which sacred authority is accessible and define the ways in which it is used in the community. Thus, the rituals serve as a sanction against manipulation and abuse of sacred authority, so as not to harm the common good (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940).

The foregoing argument does not imply that sacred authority was never abused and manipulated. African feminist theologians have lamented over how African indigenous sacred authority easily gets entangled within gendered relations of power (Oduyoye 1986; 2001). They do not regard sacred authority as neutral. For them, neutrality is hardly part of any form of religious authority. Some indigenous notions of sacred authority are wellsprings of patriarchy and abysses in which women and girls are subjected to various sexualised rituals in the name of the community's well-being.² Although African feminist theologians regard the African ontological past as a critical source for creating theology, nevertheless, have rejected an uncritical retrieval of every element, as too often they have reinforced and perpetuated patriarchy in many African churches (Oduyoye 1995; Phiri 1997).

Influenced by modernisation, sacred authority has been redefined within African Neo-Pentecostalism, in which the dialogue between Christian notions of spiritual power and indigenous sacred authority now inform a certain type of male hegemony that replicates itself through ecclesiastical spaces in many parts of Africa (Kaunda & Pokol 2019).

My argument is that Neo-Pentecostalism has not changed the African predisposition to sacred authority. It has rather reinforced it through modernisation. As a way of life, the African ontological past lays the foundation for collective African spiritual consciousness which continues, albeit in a modified or loosely reinterpreted form, to shape many African Neo-Pentecostal Christians' understandings, interpretations and conceptions of reality (Maxwell 2006; Meyer 1999; Gifford 1998). This means that, while many Africans have converted to Neo-Pentecostalism, their notions of authority have not been converted, only modernised. In fact, as argued earlier, the notions of sacred authority appear to have been reinforced by biblical

2 For a detailed discussion of various sexually related rituals for women, see Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1992.

conceptions of spiritual power (Kaunda 2018a). A number of scholars studying African religions have noted that the key elements of traditional African notions of sacred authority remain salient, resilient and deeply entrenched in African Neo-Pentecostalism (Kalu 2008; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). However, it must be acknowledged that modernised notions of sacred authority cannot easily be assigned to African Neo-Pentecostalism as a whole. Rather, it is possible to identify some salient characteristics that influence and shape their leadership approaches. This suggests that, while the German sociologist, economist, and politician Max Weber's (1958) thesis of disenchantment of the world as one of the most important consequences of modernism has not taken place in Africa, other aspects of modernism have adversely affected the African Neo-Pentecostalism interpretations and exercise of sacred authority. Thus, it is important to investigate the ways in which modernism has influenced the African Neo-Pentecostal adoption and exercise of indigenous sacred authority.

3. ON MODERNISATION OF SACRED AUTHORITY

While modernisation certainly occasions significant alterations in religious imaginations, in many African societies, it has not resulted in diminished religious influence in the public spheres. However, the consequences of modernisation on African Neo-Pentecostalism cannot be denied or ignored (Beyers 2014). Chaves (1994) argued that modernisation should not be perceived as diminishing religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority. Scholars argue that it is no longer possible to assert that modernity is irreconcilable with religion, as religious beliefs remain vibrant and resilient. Chaves (1994) also argued that modernisation has caused a decline in the influence of social structures whose legitimation rests on reference to the supernatural. He identified three levels on which the influence of modernisation has diminished religious authority. First, in the capacity of religious elites to exercise authority over other institutional spheres. Secondly, in the control over the organisational resources within the religious sphere. Thirdly, in the decline in religious control of individual actions. This might be true in some Western contexts. In Africa, Neo-Pentecostalism is the most visible and profound aspect of religious change and is a social force that integrates cultural, economic, and political spheres. Its conservative and literal interpretations of the Bible, with respect to social relations, are increasingly perceived as exhibiting a strong influence on many aspects of social institutions and their moral orientations (Ukah 2016). Scholars argue that Neo-Pentecostalism shifts its adherents' beliefs, practices, values, and morality in profound ways such that, when other factors are favourable, this very often leads them to make quite radical relational, social, economic, and political changes in their

life orientations (Freeman 2015). On the one hand, Chaves (1994) is right, the processes of modernisation are fluid and multidirectional. He suggests that the process be engaged from its influence on religious authority. On the other hand, his interpretation of the modernisation process as diminishing the influence of religious authority on individual values and norms should be interpreted within the context of his writing.

In this article, I argue that the modernisation process in African Neo-Pentecostalism is not necessarily about religious authorities losing control over the individual's beliefs, practices, values, and moral principles; rather, about the individuation of sacred authority itself. African Neo-Pentecostal pastors claim to derive their sacred authority from the call of God which is legitimatised through performances of healings, miracles and disclosure of secret knowledge about their members' experiences. In an empirical research done in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pype (2012) established that many followers in most of the Neo-Pentecostalism churches are convinced that their pastors have unlocked or unmasked the secret of supernatural knowledge. There is a belief that their pastors are, in mysterious ways, divine conduits through which the power of the Holy Spirit flows to reach their congregants. As demonstrated earlier, this is a loose reinterpretation of indigenous sacred authority, in which the ancestors were regarded as media through which sacred authority reached the community. In some Neo-Pentecostalism churches, the pastors are perceived as sacred authority who are distinguished from other human beings. By their person and being, they are mystical beings, sacred vessels of God, and visible links between the spiritual realm and the natural world (Kaunda 2018b). In heterogender-entrenched contexts such as many African societies, this kind of authority, coupled with literal biblical interpretation, figuratively and literally makes women vulnerable to patriarchal oppression and sexualised treatments.

The influence of modernisation on sacred authority could be formulated by the three interconnected forces of individualisation, fragmentation, and fundamentalism (Beyers 2014). First, individualisation refers to the situation where sacred authority is individualised by specific pastors. In this approach, sacred authority no longer rests with the institutionalised church and indigenous communities; rather, the individual pastors claim to have exclusive access to the divine realms. This also means that they have the ability to autonomously and exclusively decide on specific Christian norms and values that function as an obligatory control mechanism imposed on their members. In his thesis on modernisation, the French Sociologist Émile Durkheim indicated how individuals in societies would determine for themselves what they are to believe. However, in terms of the Neo-Pentecostal modernisation

thesis, as Wariboko (2018:158) observes of Nigerian Neo-Pentecostalism, members make meaning within

the circumscriptions of the social system that envelops the believers and the boundaries patrolled by the clergy or the hierarchical authorities of the church.

Wariboko (2018:158) adds:

Contrary to the celebrated semiotic democracy and brotherhood of believers in Pentecostal churches, there is some panoptic power over the people. The disciplinary energy of the clergy is always quick to deploy its moral, aesthetic, suasive, and legal powers to control the meanings, pleasures, and social identities of the people.

In this paradigm of modernisation, individual pastors decide on the specific beliefs and practices of their local congregation (Durkheim [1912] 2008). This has resulted in a multiplicity of beliefs and practices that are determined by individual pastors as manufacturers of such intangible spiritual goods to effectively fulfil the neo-traditional spiritual consumers’ market demands, and thereby remain competitive on the spiritual market. In short, individual pastors have positioned themselves as spiritual merchants who selectively interpret specific elements of religion deemed desirable and likely to sell. This allows “bricolage beliefs, practices and values” or “pick, choose and imitate” (Dobbelaere & Voyé 1990).

Secondly, a result of the individualisation of sacred authority is religious fragmentation. The more sacred authority is individualised, the less Neo-Pentecostal pastors want to interact and enter into dialogue with other Christian denominations, not to mention other religions. The result is a mushrooming of Neo-Pentecostalism, as each pastor seeks to completely break free from the influence of other religious authorities. The continuous mushrooming of Neo-Pentecostal factions is proof of the continuous fragmentation of sacred authority. This situation causes pastors to become very powerful and resist any form of situated accountability and perceived moral-ethical demands of institutional Christianity as an unawesome interference with “liberal access” to the divine. Many Neo-Pentecostal churches practise a kind of government, in which the founder takes on absolute power and is not held accountable by anyone (*Quampah* 2014). The combination of increasing individualisation and fragmentation of sacred authority has fundamentally weakened collective shared beliefs, practices, and values, as every pastor functions as the final authority in matters of faith and morality. Casanova (2013) classifies this process as de-confessionalisation, individualisation, and pluralisation of religious authority. In contemporary Africa, this process also threatens the ideals of equality, equity, as well as social and gender justice, as pastors can

autonomously decide what they perceive to be valuable for their congregation and call for rejection of, and public resistance against certain human rights such as sexual minorities rights perceived to be in conflict with their interpretations of the Bible (Kaunda & Kaunda 2018). Indeed, individuation of sacred authority is registered in the “flux and mix, diversity, fragmentation, multiple identities, post-modernity, and hybridity” (Meyer 2010:113) among neo-Pentecostalism. Taylor (2006) describes secularisation as a process of fragmentation and individualisation of sacred authority.

Thirdly, the combination of individuation and fragmentation of sacred authority has engendered fundamentalist religious rivalry and destructive competition, which have contributed to the demographic explosion of Neo-Pentecostal churches. This radical expansion is not institutionalised growth; rather, a “sub-culture creation” to borrow Bruce’s (1992) phrase. This subculture is as much a reaction to secularisation as a search for distinctive religious identities and formulation of spiritual products suited within neo-traditional and Neo-Pentecostal religiously marketised spaces. It is important to highlight that most of these churches regard themselves as movements for the restoration of the so-called true Christian faith. In so doing, most of them have taken on a fundamentalist approach to issues of morality, especially gender and sexualities. Wentzel (2011) mentions that religious fundamentalism is a reaction to the threat of any change that includes secularisation. A reaction to the spiritual emptiness of modernity, the relativism of postmodernism and the perceived spiritual bankruptcy in the mainline churches, and an alleged or actual moral decay in Western societies (Johnstone 1982; Wentzel 2011). These movements have emphasised the maintenance of sacred authority and basic truths of evangelicalism. They seek to reinforce conservative biblical morals and ethics especially in relation to gender norms and sexualities. As demonstrated in the case study below, the individualisation, fragmentation and fundamentalisation of sacred authority places sacred *authority* in individual pastors *who have exercised it within religious and social structures informed by heteropatriarchy*. Wariboko (2018:155) rightly states:

The Pentecostal worldview is essentially split from within. There is a part that is faithful to the received tradition of Christian faith or conservative biblical orientation, and there is always another path that threatens to exceed the bounds of the faith, to make common cause with liberal, secular forms of explanation or understanding.

Wariboko (2018:155) stresses that

[t]hese two are at the heart of the Pentecostal worldview and ... constitute a tension that is always at the brink of breaking loose but not quite there yet.

However, empirical evidence suggests that some scandalous heteropatriarchal eruptions have resulted in gender and sexual violence against women and girls in many parts of Africa, including West Africa. These form the research context of Wariboko. The next section demonstrates how the influence of modernisation on sacred authority reinforces and reproduces heterogendered authority among some Neo-Pentecostal men of God, *rendering* women and girls *vulnerable* to sexual exploitation and violence.

4. THE ABNORMAL SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS MODERNISATION: THE CASE OF OMOTOSO

As indicated in the introduction, there are countless ways in which sacred authority is abused among the so-called “men of God” in contemporary African Neo-Pentecostalism. For purposes of this article, I limit the discussion to a Nigerian televangelist Rev. Timothy Omotoso in South Africa.

On 20 April 2017, Omotoso was arrested on 22 charges bordering on “human trafficking, sexual assault and the rape of young girls” (SABC News 2017). 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 and sexually molesting girls as young as 14 years old. He was accused of raping over 30 young women and girls who testified to their experiences in the court of law. The pastor forced young girls to massage his phallus, and then had intercourse with them without protection. After the act, he recited Psalm 51 and prayed (*Naija Standard Newspaper* 2017). Nadar (2018:n.p.), in her reflection on the Omotoso 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 [The South African Council of Churches] 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. (Italics in original.)

She believes that “Timothy Omotoso is not the leader of a ‘cult’ – he is not part of a lunatic fringe – but that Omotosos” are everywhere in Neo-Pentecostal churches, because “teachings allow and promote the existence of Omotosos” (Nadar 2018:n.p.). Nadar (2018:n.p.) emphasises 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.

Nadar (2018:n.p.) 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 [unreservedly to sacred] authority, and she witnesses a church where men and women don't share equally in authority.

For Nadar (2018:n.p.),

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.

Nadar (2018:n.p.) stresses that

[a]s long as churches remain environments where men have all the power, 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.

Nadar (2018:n.p.) concludes: "The 'biblically-sanctioned' teachings that encourage and teach power differentials between genders is what made the Omotoso case possible." Omotoso's congregants regarded him as a spiritual or sacred father. The sacred authority discourse found a new reinterpretation in Neo-Pentecostal spirituality, in which women form the majority of the believers, often subjected to submission teachings, which appear to subconsciously ritualise their bodies and sexualities and make them vulnerable to spiritual manipulations.

The Omotoso case demonstrates the flipside of the modernisation of sacred authority, which now shapes hegemonic masculinities enforced and policed through Neo-Pentecostalism,

with a view to maintenance not only of a general system of male supremacy, but the continuation of a particular type of hegemonic male supremacy: the heterosexual type (Maluleke 2018b).

The traditional beliefs and practices that sacralise religious leaders have been uncritically adopted and utilised as instruments to legitimatise and maintain the uniqueness of "men of God" from the laity. The only difference is that traditional priests functioned within the ambit of a system with collective spiritual imaginations and accountability. The case of Omotoso shows how,

through modernisation, “men of God” have individualised, fragmented and fundamentalised sacred authority and increasingly positioned themselves as having unlocked unlimited sacred power, to which they alone have exclusive access. Thus, sacred authority is often abused not only due to a lack of adequate structures of accountability, but also as a result of feeling exceptional and closer to the divine than their members. Hence, the need to draw afresh life-giving conceptions and exercise of sacred authority that will promote and enable the full humanity of women, children, all marginalised, including all creation.

5. THE EMPTIED (KENOTIC) SACRED AUTHORITY

In the process of modernisation of the notions of sacred authority within Neo-Pentecostalism, women and their bodies are increasingly demoted to a complete obliterated self, thus making them vulnerable to the disempowering effects of religious normativity, as explained in the Omotoso case. As established earlier, the individualising, fragmenting and fundamentalising tendencies of modernisation are at the core of the reproduction and perpetuation of heteropatriarchal-informed sacred authority, which elite “men of God” leverage to subordinate women and other men in societies and churches. In other words, modernisation aids the perpetuation of individualised heteropatriarchal-defined values of conservative Christian faith and some traditional religious heritages. It appears that, through the process of modernisation and secularisation, Neo-Pentecostalism has preserved the traditional religious systems by simultaneously erasing and sustaining elements of its sacred authority. Derrida (1981:71) describes this as paleonomy – the “maintenance of an old name in order to launch a new concept”. This describes a situation in which Neo-Pentecostalism has not only emerged as a new religious system, but also redefined asymmetric social relations of power between the pastor and the laity. This has made Neo-Pentecostal beliefs and practices in terms of gender and sexuality a locus for enunciation and reproduction of sexualised theo/pneumatocratic complexes, which continually manifest in gender- and sexuality-based violence perpetuated by some pastors, as in the case of Omotoso.

In order to move forward, I propose reconceptualising sacred authority through kenosis. The word “kenosis”, derived from the Greek *κενόω* (*kenōō*, “I empty, make empty”), is found in Philippians 2:7, and refers to Christ’s self-emptying in the incarnation. This act of self-emptying is an authentic realisation and praxis of the divine authority within the material world. Because God took on an embodied existence, the material becomes an ever-potential site of exercising sacred/divine authority (Kearney 2009). In this perspective, Christ’s power was demonstrated in kenosis – the power to empty himself,

the power not to regard himself as God; rather, the power to make himself into a creature. This self-emptying authority is based on radical service, which Jesus demonstrated by decentering himself, refusing to be equal with God (Phil. 2:6), refusing to lord it over others (Mark 10:42-43). Christ emptied sacred authority and, in so doing, highlighted the margins of society as the reason for leadership – women, lepers, children, tax collectors, the sick, the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable. He crossed the divine-human and sacred-secular borders that were artificially created through sin. This does not concern giving ontological privilege to the marginalised in their relationship with God over and above other human beings. Rather, it is a radical affirmation that, through kenosis, Jesus is on a divine mission of emptying principalities and powers of their claim to sacred authority, and call for the authority that promotes justice and full dignity of the marginalised in their own struggle alongside God for the fullness of life.

Jesus' emptied authority was not only in what he could do for others, but also in what he could make out of himself – the power to empty himself, in order to overcome the dichotomy between sacred and secular. However, it was also the power to resist being co-opted into the sinfulness of a secular world and conform to its standards (Rom. 12:2). This resulted in a paradigm shift in reinterpreting sacred authority, not only about service, but also as a power devoid of self, power within the material world, and power to restore humanity to its authentic humanity. Therefore, human beings can only authentically participate in divine activities in the world by recognising and affirming their own creature-ness, humanness and belonging with other human beings and the entire creation. In other words, authentic leadership or the exercise of authority reveals the fullness of Christ through radical emptied authority. This means that the starting point for authentic leadership is to prioritise the restoration of self-authentic-humanity, love, respect, and service in the struggle for the liberation of the marginalised world and humanity.

However, while kenosis provides a vital conversation partner, it is important to also underline that the seeming humility in kenosis has not insulated from facilitating a human perception of divine relationality as “power over” and, in turn, supporting a divine metaphysics of power as domination or hierarchical (Mercedes 2011). Feminist theologians have argued that kenosis is anything but an innocent concept. As mentioned earlier, in the vast majority of 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 (Oduyoye 1995). This makes kenosis a dangerous concept that requires a cautionary approach, especially in the context of abuse of sacred authority. In short, kenotic vision is vulnerable to misinterpretation and corruption.

Vattimo perceives kenosis as the inauguration of secularisation through de-sacralisation. 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, out of the sacred and into the secular, spatial temporality. Vattimo (2007:35) views kenosis as God’s abasement from being the master of humanity to being its friend (John 15:15). Vattimo (1988) believes that kenosis is a process of emancipation and liberation by weakening strong structures such as religions or any metaphysics, for violence is at the core of both. There is a way in which Vattimo’s kenosis could be regarded as reductionism and misinterpretation. Kenosis reveals what God has always been, one with creation, but human beings were unable to comprehend. It demonstrates that God was never the master of humanity, but always a friend who never left as a result of humanity’s sin. The sinfulness of humanity did not make God become anything rather than who God has always been – “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14), always choosing not to be equal with God (himself), for the sake of being one with creation. From the beginning, God has always been at home with creation (“God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” [Gen. 3:8]). Thus, interpreted from an African perspective, kenosis could be regarded as God “striking an intricate balance” between eternity and spatial temporality; between God and humanity; between God and creation; between spiritual and material; between sacred and secular, and so on. In short, kenosis could be regarded as God taking on *ubuntu*. God demonstrates that “God is, because we are and because we are, God is”. God shows that authority is embedded in the quest for a balance of forces. Authority is generated from *ubuntu* – promoting, empowering, and liberating power within relational nexus in which shared inclusivist power affirms the humanity of all. This is not the power over, but rather the power with, from and within others, in which religious leaders recognise that their humanity is bound up within the humanity of others. Emptied authority concerns just socio-relational actions. It resists both secularisation and sacralisation. Jesus, through 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 nonhuman creation.

For Bediako (1993; 1995), this approach to kenosis affirms the continuation of the African world as a spiritually animated reality that functions with configured powers, in which all the various forms of human participation in divine authority occur through *ubuntu*. Bediako underlines the incarnation of Jesus, which reflects a dynamic encounter between God and creation, spiritual and physical, as a radical accountability, in which creation witnesses to justice and equality for all. Through kenosis, God shows that he is accountable to humanity and creation in the exercise of divine authority, to the extent of refusing to abuse divine authority even when he is challenged, and rather

choosing death on the cross. It is in the context of post-resurrection that Jesus stated in Matthew 28:18, “all authority in heaven and on earth is given to me”. Bediako (1993:213) reminds us that these

words are in the context of post-resurrection 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.

However, these words also mean that no one possesses any authority in heaven or on earth, except Christ. It also means that power can only be accessed through participation in and exercised by following the way of Christ. Any failure, as in the case study above, is a clear indication that the powers have fallen and, according to Wink (1984), all fallen powers are demonic. They must be rejected and resisted. The way of Jesus constitutes a new, alternative use of authority in the world, overridden by Roman and religious oppression and exploitation. Jesus understands power in terms of marginality – the power to humanise the marginalised; to side with the dehumanised; to heal and deliver the oppressed; to sacrifice his life for others; to forgive sin; to serve and not be served, and to promote justice and equality for all. His understanding of power culminated in his death on the cross, where he *ubuntu-ed* all power and authority. On the cross, he “stripped all powers at every level of human society, stripped them of any pretensions to ultimacy” (Bediako 1995:245). Bediako (1995:244) concludes that, through his resurrection, Jesus showed that “authority truly belongs only to God”. He believes that this approach to authority is critical for subverting dictatorial and absolutist claims that seem to be inherent in contemporary African Neo-Pentecostalism.

Emptied authority is that which has been transformed from being something unquestioned and expected, to that which yields itself to accountability, even criticism. It seeks to maintain a balance between the pastor and the community of faith. It is a sacred authority that does justice and promotes human rights (Amos 4:24). It is power in sound and just relationships. The power of the pastor is generated within and for just relationships. The power of God empowers the community of faith to live and 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, like the rest of the community of faith. This is important, as any artificial separation between the pastor and the members has proven that the pastors could easily usurp the place of God as they increasingly become absorbed with demonstrating their spiritual gymnastics and claiming to have unlocked the secret to divine knowledge. Emptied authority rejects the sacralisation of any human being and resists perceiving any human as possessing authority – all authority/power belongs to God alone. It rather

focuses on the mutual empowerment of the pastor and the marginalised, in the struggle to authenticate their humanity and actualise the fullness of life in Jesus Christ (John 10:10). In short, emptied authority refuses to collaborate with any form of patriarchy, both with the interpretation of God as the male who empties himself into marginalised flesh, especially female flesh, through the process of incarnation and disempowers women to resist their sexualisation and objectification (Groenhout 2006). It is a radical refusal to take the place of God in the exercise of power, and a conscious embrace of continuous self-kenosis (Kearney 2009).

6. CONCLUSION

The classical prophecy of modernisation to be marked by secularisation of the world has failed. This article showed that modernisation and sacralisation have taken place simultaneously in many African nations. What still holds the water from the thesis is that modernisation has impacted on many societies and religions beyond Western societies. Within this ambit, this article argued that African Neo-Pentecostalism has adapted indigenous notions of sacred authority via three interrelated elements of modernisation, namely individuation, fragmentation, and fundamentalism. The case of Omotoso illustrates how Neo-Pentecostal pastors use the modernisation of sacred authority to reinforce and legitimatise sexualisation and domination of women and girls. In order to rectify this hegemonic resourcing of sacred authority, there is a need to reclaim the holistic imaginations and praxis of authority, in which there is no dichotomy between the centre and the margins/borders; the sacred and the secular; the divine and the human, and the power and the powerlessness/vulnerability.

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