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Review Essay

Understanding Religion and Politics in Africa: A Call for the Re-enchantment of the Scholarly Imagination

Anicka Fast | ORCID: 0000-0002-7196-0282
Mennonite Mission Network, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
anicka.fast@gmail.com

Abstract

In his 2015 book *Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa*, Paul Gifford argues that Christianity in Africa is bifurcated into an 'enchanted' and a 'disenchanted' form. He presents the conundrum that the enchanted form is pervasive yet incompatible with modernity and consistently ignored by scholars. In this review article I draw on Gifford's conundrum as a springboard to propose a new angle from which to analyse religion and politics in postcolonial Africa: one that moves beyond received dichotomies between tradition and modernity, public and private life, or this-worldly and otherworldly concerns. The work of Michael Schatzberg, Peter Geschiere, Ogbu Kalu, and Emmanuel Katongole moves in various ways past the oppositions that undermine Gifford's work. In dialogue with these scholars, I articulate a plea to scholars of religion and politics in Africa to develop an appreciation for the powerful role of the religious imagination in African and global arenas of power.

Keywords

religion – politics – modernity – Africa – secularism – Pentecostalism – imagination – Christianity

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1 Paul Gifford and the 'Enchanted' Imagination

In his recent monograph *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (2015), Paul Gifford provocatively argues that there are two forms of Christianity in Africa, and that they differ significantly from one another both in terms of their public significance and in their capacity to help Africa transcend a dysfunctional 'neo-patrimonialism' in order to join the 'modern world' (2015, 11). The first form, which Gifford sees as the most pervasive, is characterized by an 'enchanted' imagination that remains in continuity with African traditional religion in its ascription of spiritual causality to physical problems and in its focus on manipulating potent spiritual forces so as to prevent them from undermining the good life (2015, 13). Gifford offers several extended examples – drawing on decades of his own research and personal experiences – to show how the 'enchanted religious imagination' (2015, 14) leads to a broad acceptance of phenomena such as ritual killings, body harvesting from albinos, or penis snatching. At the same time, he emphasizes the degree to which the authority to direct spiritual forces is progressively being transferred to Pentecostal pastors (2015, 14–17). Gifford contrasts this 'enchanted' imagination with a second, disenchanted, secularized form of Christianity, which Gifford sees as prevalent especially among African Catholics, that understands evil structurally and attempts to combat it through development and NGO-ization. Its this-worldly emphasis allows it to play a significant public role through its educational and healthcare institutions (2015, 85–87, 96).

For Gifford, this bifurcation of African Christianity points to a conundrum. On the one hand, this so-called enchanted worldview is so pervasive that it continually rears its head even inside the most staid and modern forms of institutional Christianity (2015, 107–9). On the other hand, both scholars and proponents of the disenchanted form of Christianity tend to ignore the enchanted dimension even when it is widely present within religious and political institutions (2015, 106). Yet Gifford insists that this pervasive enchanted imagination is completely incompatible with modernity. Its underlying narrative or 'key scenario' stubbornly situates the 'Real' inside the invisible world in a way that is fundamentally nonmodern and incompatible with social and political progress in today's world (2015, 149). The challenge for Gifford, then, is how to get 'observers of global Christianity' to first stop ignoring the pervasiveness of the enchanted religious imagination, and then to start critiquing it (2015, 157). For example, he believes that Western scholars need to stop being so generous and nonjudgmental toward witchcraft in Africa and to become aware of its dysfunctional, fear-enhancing character (2015, 150). For Gifford, beliefs in the

unseen world are undermining African politics, yet Africans show no signs of willingness to give up these beliefs.

Gifford makes his case using sets of oppositions that are standard currency among Africanist scholars. We are used to debating whether particular religious or political forms are traditional or modern, public or private, this-worldly or otherworldly. This article seeks to explore a new approach toward the analysis of religion and politics in Africa. My proposal is that it is only by changing our currency – in effect, allowing our imaginations as scholars to be 're-enchanted' – that we will be able to engage in the discussion of African politico-religious imaginations in a meaningful way. By whimsically repurposing Gifford's terminology of enchantment, I am trying to point out that politics in Africa, just like anywhere else, is religious. Political claims are claims about moral absolutes that may surpass the seen world. Gifford's proposal is provocative because he dares to claim that a particular African religious imagination is problematic, but the scholarly categories at his disposal do not allow him to critique the content of this imagination substantively. I argue that scholars must learn to appreciate the powerful role of the moral imagination regardless of whether such imagination is ostensibly religious or secular, public or private. This can allow them to move past the question of whether Africans' imaginations are 'enchanted' by religious ideas, and rather to focus on the content of the imaginations that are being expressed, both by local actors and by themselves as scholar-observers.

I proceed through a dialogue with the work of four scholars who each speak to Gifford's conundrum in some way, and who each move past the oppositions that undergird his work in ways that are sometimes modest and sometimes quite bold. I have chosen scholars who engage with the relationship between religion and politics in Africa from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Michael Schatzberg is a political scientist whose work on the postcolonial state in Zaïre explores the dynamics of oppression that developed under Mobutu's dictatorship as state actors attempted to accumulate wealth and power as rapidly as possible. Peter Geschiere is an anthropologist who explores the relationship of witchcraft discourses in Africa to notions of tradition and modernity. Ogbu Kalu is a historian of African Christianity whose recent work seeks to explain social and political phenomena in Africa by relating them to the religious and ethical beliefs or commitments of its three major religious traditions; and Emmanuel Katongole is a political theologian who engages with theories of narrative and memory as he explores the church's potential role in embodying an alternative political imagination to the postcolonial state narrative of plunder and violence. By choosing such diverse scholars, I

attempt to show that the question of religious imagination and its relation to politics is one that should be – and is – of interest and relevance across a wide range of scholarly disciplines. The arrangement of these four works into a progression constitutes an argument of its own, as I show how each of these scholars, to an increasing extent, challenges the accepted dichotomies that shape and limit Gifford's work. At the end of this essay the focus returns to an evaluation of Gifford's claims. In light of these four scholars' work, I argue that democracy, development, and modernity are not religiously neutral concepts. Therefore scholars need to interact with the claims of African politico-religious imaginations in ways that more explicitly recognize their own situated engagement in a moral tradition. I close by articulating several constructive proposals for new methods of scholarly engagement that overcome false dichotomies between religion and politics, tradition and modernity, and so permit a more fruitful interaction with the so-called enchanted imagination that Gifford sees as Africa's stumbling block.

2 Michael Schatzberg

Michael Schatzberg published *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* in 1988. Drawing on data collected through fieldwork in the village of Lisala in Equateur province in the 1970s, Schatzberg highlights the simultaneously insecure and powerful character of the Mobutist state as viewed from the underside, by those most directly affected by its apparatus of coercion and intimidation. He describes this paradoxical character of the state as the result of a 'dialectic of oppression' (Schatzberg 1988, 3) – a continually self-reinforcing interaction between narratives of insecurity and scarcity. Because state actors' access to the state apparatus is typically temporary and insecure, they attempt to accumulate wealth and power as rapidly as possible. This exacerbates both scarcity and insecurity and so feeds the oppressive dialectic (Schatzberg 1988, 4).

For the purpose of my argument, what is most remarkable about Schatzberg's book is not the rather dated neo-Marxist theoretical framework that depicts the postcolonial African state as engaged in a class struggle on the brink of revolution. Neither is it the introduction of the 'triple helix' of state, class and ethnicity (Schatzberg 1988, 18), which provides a highly theorized but relatively vague explanation of how oppression actually works. Although interesting and important, his explanation of why the state can seem simultaneously weak and strong does not move beyond the categories of analysis that are typical within African studies. However, there are three ways in which

Schatzberg does break out of the mold of what is generally considered acceptable for Africanist scholars to say about African politics.

First, Schatzberg exposes the Mobutist state as morally deficient. While he tries to explain the logic behind the state's actions, his ultimate conclusion is that the state is actively and willingly exacerbating the 'most vicious elements' of the dialectic of oppression (1988, 143). Seen from below by the citizenry, its power is 'massive and overwhelming' (1988, 142). The state chooses to respond to insecurity by taking draconian measures to increase the insecurity of others. While some spaces of resistance to the state may be possible within the cracks of the regime, or through the alternative forms of 'economic, social, and political influence' wielded by the Catholic church (1988, 117), ultimately the state responds with fury to any reminder of its impotence, continuing to feed the dialectic of oppression. In short, while Schatzberg frames his work as a response to the challenge of determining whether the Mobutist state is weak or strong, the subtext of the book is that the failure of the state is due to its oppressiveness and its viciousness, which are exposed most clearly through the snarling face it shows to its most vulnerable population. Schatzberg engages with the question of whether the particular forms of oppression exercised by Mobutu are in continuity or discontinuity with precolonial or colonial forms of statecraft, proposing the concept of 'dependent autonomy' to express the relative freedom that powerful state actors have to keep accumulating (1988, 20). However, what matters most to Schatzberg is that the poor, as the least powerful actors, continue to bear the brunt of the oppression. In other words, Schatzberg is expressing a moral judgment: what is going on here is 'lamentable' because the suffering of the weak is due to the choice of the strong to pursue wealth at their expense (1988, 24).

Second, Schatzberg is explicit – though in a very low-key way – about the moral stance he is taking as a scholar. In his view, an analytical focus on the hinterland is what makes it possible to fully expose the malevolent side of the regime that tends not to be shown to international observers (1988, 6). By uncovering the levels of desperation and misery among the subordinate and the 'sinews' (1988, 31) of the coercive apparatus by which they are constantly terrorized and intimidated, Schatzberg claims that political analysts will be able to move beyond abstract theories of the state to those grounded in reality (1988, 144). In other words, Schatzberg is expressing the moral stance that 'we' observers need to expose how bad things really are to the international community.

Third, Schatzberg recognizes the role of narrative in the political imagination and seeks to identify the content of the narratives that drive or reinforce

the dialectic of oppression. In addition to pointing out the role of narratives of insecurity and scarcity as the 'twin motors powering a dialectic of oppression' (1988, 135), Schatzberg notes the power of familial metaphors as the 'ideological cement' of the regime (1988, 73). He points out the enduring appeal of the image of father as a metaphor for a political leader, and traces the precedents of this image back to the precolonial and colonial eras (1988, 97). In short, Schatzberg argues that particular stories can feed oppression and inequality. This begs the question of whether there are any other stories out there capable of competing with these. Schatzberg implies that there may be: the 'classical European legal ideology' imbibed by magistrates may help them to resist the state to an extent (1988, 12); the radical social withdrawal of the Kitawalists demonstrates the potential power of an exit strategy (1988, 133). However, he remains rather pessimistic about this possibility. After all, the most successful locus of resistance, the Catholic Church, is powerful because of its ongoing access to institutional and financial resources, but its resistance remains ambiguous because the ecclesial leaders are embedded within similar economic power dynamics as the other political elites (1988, 121–22). In this case, religious resistance is not about living out a different story, but about having more of the same kind of power as the state.

3 Peter Geschiere

In *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (1997), anthropologist Peter Geschiere studies witchcraft discourses in Cameroon in order to argue that such discourses are both profoundly political and profoundly modern. He insists that rather than seeing witchcraft discourses in Africa as vestiges of traditional culture that will eventually disappear through contact with modernity, scholars must understand that in Africa witchcraft works the same way political power works more generally on the sub-continent: as a form of the politics of the belly (Geschiere 1997, ix).[1] Witchcraft beliefs are modern in the sense that they have the 'potential to incorporate and address modern changes' (1997, 198), but they are also highly ambiguous. Depending on how they are translated into political and cultural institutions, they may provide leveling resources to the weak that help to combat the inequalities of modernity, or, increasingly, they may reinforce elite domination through accumulation (1997, 198–205).

Geschiere moves well beyond Schatzberg in his complex analysis of the relationship between religion and politics. Not only does he insist that religious beliefs must be taken seriously on their own terms, but he repeatedly points

out that these religious beliefs are themselves political in that they are intimately related to power and kinship, acting as the invisible 'shadow of politics' (1997, 95). While Schatzberg recognizes that some religious actors may pose a challenge to the state, he assumes that they pose such a challenge on political, nonreligious grounds. For example, for Schatzberg the Catholic Church in Zaire has power because of its institutions and money, not because of its mastery of unseen forces. The recognition of religious beliefs as an essential element of politics thus distinguishes Geschiere's argument from Schatzberg's. By blurring the distinction between religion and politics, Geschiere is effectively able to challenge the opposition between tradition and modernity.

Although Geschiere provides a more sophisticated analysis of religion than Schatzberg, he resembles Schatzberg in his willingness to speak morally about the political situation in Africa, his explicitness about his contribution as a scholar in relation to this moral challenge, and his recognition of the power of narrative in driving an oppressive political reality. First, Geschiere makes a moral judgment about the problematic role played by witchcraft in the postcolonial Cameroonian context. While he suggests that his argument about the ambiguity of witchcraft moves beyond old anthropological oppositions between good and evil, the thrust of his analysis is that witchcraft tends to lead to terrifying vulnerability, trapping people within a circular discourse that is like a 'vortex that is … difficult to escape' (Geschiere 1997, 60). Although in the right circumstances witchcraft accusations can serve as a strategy for subordinates to curb excessive accumulation by a few, the huge pressures of modernity and wealth accumulation on the African kinship system lead to a high level of strain and tension, allowing witchcraft discourses, as the 'dark side of kinship' (1997, 213), to proliferate in their most dangerous form. In short, although the ostensible point of the book is that witchcraft is modern, the subtext is that the modern pressure on kinship relationships actually brings out witchcraft's worst side, leading to panic and insecurity, growing inequality, and an increasingly aggressive role for *nganga* or healers.

Second, Geschiere situates himself as a scholar within this moral universe. He explicitly presents his contribution as one of redressing the delicate balance between publicity and secrecy through the historicization and contextualization of witchcraft discourses (1997, 205). In this way he hopes to relativize the power of these discourses over people (1997, xi). By demonstrating the ways in which certain cultural institutions can constitute a check on the inequality-exacerbating propensities of witchcraft discourses, Geschiere is trying to retrieve a less problematic narrative of witchcraft, one that is embedded in cultural institutions and forms of authority that limit its harm. Given the close connection between religion and politics that Geschiere accepts, it

would appear that he is thus engaged, as a scholar, in promoting an alternative religious imagination.

Third, Geschiere recognizes the political power of religious narrative. In addition to his own contribution in renarrating witchcraft beliefs historically, he depicts witchcraft discourses as a circular form of imagination from which escape is impossible: to gain protection from the malevolence of witchcraft, one ends up resorting to witchcraft oneself (1997, 48). Moreover, in cases where the state becomes involved in prosecuting witches, its uncritical reliance on the testimony of *nganga*/healers demonstrates its acceptance of the 'ambiguity and circularity of local representations' and so makes it ineffective in neutralizing their danger (1997, 196). State and local actors, elites and subordinates, are all trapped in the same logic. Thus while Schatzberg identifies the story that drives an oppressive state, Geschiere concludes that a similar story is driving an oppressive religion. The way witchcraft discourses actually work in the modern world is as a legitimization of unbridled accumulation even at the expense of the most intimate kin.

4 Ogbu Kalu

In a 2010 collection of sixteen essays about religion, politics, and society in Africa, Nigerian historian Ogbu Kalu takes a foray into theological and political analysis. The volume, titled *Religions in Africa: Conflicts, Politics and Social Ethics*, is written in a dense and repetitive style, and Kalu is sometimes on shaky ground outside his main areas of expertise. Nevertheless, Kalu makes several arguments that help to move the conversation between Schatzberg, Geschiere, and Gifford to a new level.

First, Kalu proposes a slightly different perspective on the relationship between religion and politics in Africa. In some ways his analysis overlaps with that of other theorists. Like Max Weber, he insists that religious ideas have real effects on politics so that crisis in Africa cannot be explained through socio-economic factors alone (Kalu 2010, lv; see also Weber 2003, 90). Like Geschiere, he sees the proliferation of appeals to 'primal religious powers', such as witchcraft discourses, as the result of pressures of inequality in postcolonial modern Africa (Kalu 2010, 21). Kalu would undoubtedly agree with Geschiere that witchcraft is modern. However, Kalu moves beyond Weber in that he is not simply affirming that religion in Africa has political effects; he also moves beyond Geschiere's affirmation that religion is political. Instead, he affirms that politics in Africa is religious: 'Politics is a religious matter precisely because it is moral performance; it is about the undergirding values that determine how we

govern ourselves or exercise power in the task of wielding the authority given to us' (2010, 11). For Kalu, religion is the 'substratum of politics' (2010, lx) not only because primal values play a key role in the public sphere, but because the political realm itself is 'sacralized or enchanted' (2010, lxi). There is ultimately no meaningful basis by which to differentiate a religious from a political claim, since both are about exercising power morally. Kalu's perspective thus opens up a slightly different vantage point from which to analyze both religion and politics. Political analyst Achille Mbembe articulates this idea more clearly when he argues that all societies – Western or African – have a sacred dimension through which people try to make sense of life. Rejecting the tendency of Western scholars to generalize about Africans as 'incurably religious' (1988, 18) or to claim that their religiosity is simply a manifestation of their powerlessness, Mbembe insists that the relevant question is not whether but how religious ideas and imaginaries contribute to structuring society.

Second, as a result of this matter-of-fact rapprochement between religion and politics, Kalu is able to draw attention to the tension between competing stories rather than portraying a single story as hegemonic. Like Valentin Mudimbe, Kalu analyzes the Western civilizing mission as a 'redemptive endeavour' – the manifestation of a narrative of conversion (Kalu 2010, 17; see also Mudimbe 1988). However, unlike Mudimbe, he does not accept that this Western epistemological construct of conversion is powerful enough to keep Africans trapped within Western forms of thought (see Mudimbe 1988, 185). Instead, though he recognizes the Western story as powerful, he insists it can be countered. Moreover, he suggests it is precisely the false dichotomy between religion and politics that needs to be rejected (Kalu 2010, 11). In contrast, his description of progressive Pentecostal political engagement bears witness to a belief in the political power of prayer, and to a conviction that while social structures can be possessed or 'hijacked by demonic forces' (2010, 23), they can also be delivered through exorcism. In this way, he draws attention to the competition between different stories.

The problem with Kalu's proposal, in my view, is that he does not offer enough of a counterstory. With no robust critique of the postcolonial state, the enchanted imagination that he promotes may speak back to Western epistemological domination, but it is not clear on what basis it could resist the oppressiveness of a Mobutist state, except by praying in better politicians. When Kalu claims that 'our leaders have poured ashes on our faces by creating the blockages that prevent the resources of the nation from trickling down' (2010, 175), he seems to be subscribing to a patrimonialist understanding of wealth distribution. In short, while Kalu proposes an interesting definition of politics as offering a moral or religious narrative, he does not propose a true

counter-narrative to that of the 'Big Man Syndrome' that Gifford, Schatzberg and Geschiere all deplore. Another African theologian, Emmanuel Katongole, does take this step.

5 Emmanuel Katongole

In *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination* (2005), Ugandan scholar and Catholic priest Emmanuel Katongole presents an analysis of religion and politics that is dramatically distinct from that of the previous three scholars. In each of the ten essays that comprise this volume, Katongole claims that the Christian church in Africa has the potential to confront the hegemonic pretensions of the postcolonial nation-state by embodying an alternative political imagination to that of the state. The church's concrete ecclesial practices – Eucharist, worship, scripture reading, hospitality – can interrupt dominant narratives of 'violence, tribalism, and corruption' (Katongole 2005, x). The bold claim that underlies these essays is that there is no future for Africa – or for the world – without the church. Several aspects of Katongole's proposal are worth reviewing in detail.

First, Katongole seems to be relatively uninterested in whether social institutions are political or religious, modern or traditional, public or private. In this he resembles Kalu. Instead, what matters to Katongole is the social imagination that these institutions embody, and the way that this imagination is performed through everyday habits and practices in ways that form adherents into a particular political identity. Katongole's tone is strongly confrontational. He makes a crucial distinction between political imaginations based on violence, accumulation, and dehumanization, and those based on the dignity and sacredness of African lives. He describes the specific content of the dominant postcolonial African political imagination in stark terms:

> Operating at the intersection of African patriarchal culture on the one hand, and neo-colonial modernity grounded in economics of plunder and a self-serving politics of power on the other, modern African politics valorizes the ideals of 'big man', 'chief', 'boss', and 'commander'. The effect of this valorization is the wanton sacrificing of the poor, the weak, children, and women.
>
> KATONGOLE 2014, 422–23

For Katongole, understanding the story that drives the African postcolonial nation-state reveals that, far from being weak or impotent, the state in Africa

works all too well. Moreover, the role of a religious counternarrative is not to provide a modest adjustment to a basically acceptable political system, for example by making it more 'democratic' (2011, 2), but rather to offer a completely new political story.

Second, Katongole's analysis of politics gives a large role to memory, narrative, and performance. For example, Katongole connects the violence of Idi Amin's dictatorship with the present-day normalization of violence in Uganda to suggest that social problems such as violence must be understood as 'performances … grounded in a particular social history' (2005, xiii). Amin's regime instilled the message that 'power confers [the] right to abuse' (2005, 13) and that success could be effortless through its practices of carelessly and publicly displaying the victims of violence and even through the 'distinctive style' of Amin's secret agents, who were 'as much popular trendsetters as they were loathed and feared' (2005, 15). The power of a given political imagination thus lies in its ability to draw adherents 'into a particular vision or imagination' and so to form their identity, actually changing their moral vision of what is true, possible, or good (2005, 11–12). In the case of a domination system like the Amin dictatorship, Ugandans' difficulty in accessing memories of violence suggests that 'the fear, pain, suffering, and violence of those days … have just become part of us' (2005, 10). Memory was thus inculcated in 'bodies and overall patterns of life' through the formation of habits and practices (ibid.). By proposing that identity is formed through the performance of memories, Katongole can present the church as a site for alternative 'geographies of memory' (2005, 24), with the Eucharist as the practice that allows Christians both to remember the violence of the past correctly, and to be remade into a 'transformed community' that transcends the categories of race or ethnicity (2005, 25).

Third, Katongole walks a fine line between recognizing the power of dominant narratives, and retaining agency for the subjugated to live out an alternative. Like Schatzberg, he takes the awesome power of the postcolonial state very seriously. For example, he does not see strategies such as humour to constitute a genuine form of 'meaningful opposition' to the state (Katongole 2005, 5).[2] He accepts the idea that powerful political imaginations can colonize the consciousness of the subjugated in a way that resembles the creation of hegemony as described by Jean and John Comaroff, or the inescapability of particular epistemological categories as analyzed by Mudimbe (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Mudimbe 1988). Although Katongole always retains agency for the subjugated, it is not necessarily for the individual but for the church community. In his view, resistance to the dominant imagination can only occur through the embodiment of an alternative imagination through a political community. This is why the church is such a central category within his analysis.

Fourth, the narrative proposed by Katongole is unabashedly global. It is not just the nation-state that needs to be called to task. Intellectualist theologians of inculturation, Pentecostals, and self-centered Westerners all in turn come under the same critique of failing to take the church seriously as the site of an alternative political imagination. Katongole admonishes inculturation theologians for framing the challenge of African Christianity as one of translating a 'spiritual … Gospel' into African cultural terms (2005, 164). He insists that transcending the limitations of intellectual categories created by the West cannot happen through an activity as disembodied as translation. Such a relativist understanding, in his view, actually trivializes local differences (2005, 163). Pentecostals who subscribe to the prosperity gospel also come under fire for failing to offer an alternative to the narrative of modernity. In terms that could apply to Kalu, Katongole worries that 'born again Christians are encouraged to be among those who benefit from the economic-political order' (2005, 247). In other words, where Gifford is concerned that a Pentecostalized, 'enchanted' imagination is not modern enough, Katongole sees such an imagination to be lamentably in thrall to modernity. Finally, Katongole criticises the Western church for frequently failing to perform an identity that transcends nation-state boundaries, succumbing instead to a 'tribalism of economic interest' (2005, 104). Through his analysis of the Rwandan genocide, for example, he challenges both Western and African Christians to recognize that the dominant imagination of 'nation-state politics' poses an ongoing threat to the church's catholicity (2005, 111; see also 2009, 156). By casting Westerners and Africans as actors within a single story, Katongole challenges the former's tendency to exoticize African politics.

In the stark terms set out by Gifford, Katongole might fit into the category of 'disenchanted' Christianity – as a Catholic, he does not openly advocate exorcism as the solution to personal or structural evil, nor does he focus on the manipulation of spiritual forces as a way of attaining prosperity. His writing does not directly address traditional religion, witchcraft, or Pentecostal approaches to the unseen world. However, as I hope has become clear through this discussion, it would be singularly unhelpful to use the term 'disenchanted' to describe Katongole's political vision. Katongole's proposals transcend the oppositions between traditional and modern, political and religious, African and Western, and break new ground in the debates about agency vs. hegemony. A 'disenchanted' scholar could not articulate the tension between the political imaginations of the postcolonial state and those of the church in the way Katongole does; it is precisely his ability to identify the potent content of competing political visions, be they ostensibly enchanted or not, that gives his analysis its critical edge.

6 Disenchantment and Modernity: Revisiting Gifford's Conundrum

This extended presentation of the work of Schatzberg, Geschiere, Kalu, and Katongole opens up new perspectives for the evaluation of Gifford's claims. Gifford's recent book is provocative because it simultaneously offers an open critique of 'enchanted' African Pentecostalism, and uncritically promotes a narrative of modernity. In my view, however, while Gifford makes an important point about the power of religious narratives, his way of framing the issue stymies further reflection about the content of those narratives. The perspectives I have highlighted in the work of Schatzberg, Geschiere, Kalu, and Katongole help to demonstrate that Gifford's arguments are partly correct and partly incorrect in two ways.

First, Gifford is right about the need to name the moral implications of powerful narratives, but wrong to think that the error of a given narrative can be summed up as its failure to be modern. Gifford recognizes that political analyses of the postcolonial state in Africa often call forth moral reactions from analysts. He proposes that such judgments should be made more explicit, rather than being hidden under a blanket of relativism. The problem, however, is that the categories he uses to discuss religion and politics in Africa fail to be morally meaningful. Like many Africanists, he is trapped in categories and oppositions that prevent him from recognizing the possibility of an alternative narrative. However, as I have attempted to show through my review of the work of Schatzberg, Geschiere, Kalu, and Katongole, when debates about religion and politics in Africa are framed primarily in terms of questions of tradition vs. modernity, public vs. private life, or this-worldly vs. otherworldly concerns, they sidestep the moral and political significance of the religious imagination in modern African and global arenas of power.

Each of the four scholars I have reviewed here addresses religion and politics in Africa by trying to transcend the usual oppositions in some way. Schatzberg asks if the Zairian state is weak or strong, but underneath this conventional framing lies his conclusion that the state is vicious, oppressive, and infuriated at the possibility of resistance. Geschiere argues that witchcraft is modern, but he also presents witchcraft as the 'dark side of kinship' (1997, 213), a force that exudes danger, exacerbates inequality, strains kinship, and even sows panic. This subtext calls into question the very meaning of the distinction between tradition and modernity, though this may not have been Geschiere's intention. Kalu engages with the question of whether Pentecostalism is this-worldly or otherworldly. He shows that this is a dead-end question that grows out of an uncritical acceptance of a public-private dichotomy. Pentecostals in Africa do have something to say to the nation-state, and their prayers constitute a form

of political activity. Finally, though Katongole touches on the oft-asked question of whether the church in Africa is able to resist the oppression of the state, for him what is more interesting than asking whether the church can resist is determining what story it will resist with. All four scholars thus point to a disempowering narrative underlying African politico-religious institutions, while simultaneously rejecting Gifford's way of framing the problem as the resurgence or persistence of a traditional, 'enchanted' worldview.

Second, Gifford is right about the need for a new narrative, but wrong in seeing disenchanted modernity as a life-giving response to dehumanizing violence. Though Schatzberg and Geschiere would likely contest Gifford's language, they both seem to accept his claim that Africans are somehow in thrall to a problematic story. For Schatzberg, this story is political, not religious. For Geschiere, it is a religious story that has political implications. Unlike Gifford, neither proposes an alternative story. Gifford at least has the merit of being honest about his belief that the story of modernity can lead Africa to a better future. However, he has to admit that this story, which requires the disenchantment of religion and its separation from politics, does not seem to be of great interest to Africans. Among the scholars reviewed here, Katongole is the only one who speaks directly to this debate by offering a robust alternative narrative. The role of the church is fundamental to his idea, but this story makes no sense without the memory of a God who cares infinitely about each 'unique, precious, sacred' human life (Katongole 2011, 17). Therefore his alternative story cannot be taken seriously without a re-enchanted imagination on the part of scholars.

7 Conclusion

I conclude with several suggestions to help scholars engage more constructively with the religious and moral imaginations that deeply shape African – and human – reality. In a review essay, such proposals must necessarily remain preliminary. I offer them in a spirit of invitation, hoping to provoke further discussion and exploration.

First, it is essential to recognize that both 'religious' and 'political' institutions are in the business of making absolute claims that encompass people's entire lives. There is no particular reason to treat the 'religious' stories that drive these institutions as any less important or relevant than the 'political' ones. Sidelining stories that are based on claims about the invisible world will only serve to obscure real and powerful narratives that are shaping the lives of Africans in a post-colonial context. Therefore fruitful analysis will tend to

treat the boundary between religion and politics as extremely porous, and possibly nonexistent. In this way, scholars can pay careful attention to the politico-religious imaginations that are being proposed by all kinds of actors in Africa. In short, what matters is not whether a given imagination is 'enchanted' or not, but what claims this imagination makes about the world and how it competes or conflicts with other imaginations. Derek Peterson's social history of the East African revival demonstrates the fruitfulness of this approach: by examining religious conversion as a form of political action that is publicly relevant despite its private, internal nature, Peterson (2012) is able to show how an ascetic, non-conformist religious movement could constitute radical political dissent, presenting a major political challenge to established elites.

Second, scholars should be more explicit about their own roles as participants in the act of storytelling. When they choose to historicize a particular phenomenon, to retrieve a particular strand of tradition, or to expose the underside of a particular regime, they should recognize that they are choosing to promote a particular political imagination, in conscious or unconscious assent to Katongole's claim that truthful remembering is one of the most powerful political tasks (2005, 22). It may be that Western observers will find conversation with African theorists more straightforward when they drop their pretentions to objectivity. In my own research on the history of a missionary encounter in early twentieth-century Belgian Congo, I have chosen to work from within a theological commitment to catholicity: that is, a sense of shared belonging to a global church. This commitment, I argue, makes it possible to tell the stories of the contested missionary encounters that gave rise to the global shape of World Christianity today as an 'engaged contribution to the same struggle for catholicity that continues in the present' (Fast 2020, 120). The ecclesial struggles that shaped missionary encounters in the past are, in fact, in continuity both with today's ongoing struggles over equitable access to the historical sources needed to create catholic narratives, and with ongoing attempts among Christians in both North and South to cultivate a global solidarity that transcends racial and national boundaries (2020, 114–120).

Third, though the combined weight of the scholarship reviewed in this article supports the idea that the story of human disposability and the legitimation of violence may be the most powerful narrative driving postcolonial African politics today, it will be worthwhile to explore any places where alternative political imaginations surface. In other words, it is important not to assume a priori that a given narrative is hegemonic, but to evaluate its power by examining how it is being inculcated into everyday practices and institutions. This approach makes it possible to recognize the enduring power of certain narratives while still affirming the possibility of an alternative political

imagination. The work of Richard Elphick (2012) in tracing the religious ideal of racial equality throughout South Africa's era of apartheid represents one example of such an approach. While the counterstory often represents only a small thread in history, one can recognize the value of its subversive ability to undermine even powerful regimes.

Finally, if all politics is religious in the sense that political actors in Africa – and elsewhere – are seeking to construct regimes of 'truth' (Mbembe 1988, 26), then the politico-religious landscape can be understood as a terrain of potential confrontation between alternative moral imaginations. Whether or not a viable and large-scale challenge to the state's imaginary of violence develops, it is clear that the confrontation between an imagination of violence and one of human dignity will take the shape of a power encounter. Scholars of Africa will need to accept that, in one way or another, they are taking sides in that encounter.

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Notes

1 The term 'politics of the belly' was first popularized by Jean-François Bayart in *L'État en Afrique: la politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

2 Bayart and Mbembe seem more open to the subversive possibilities of humour and derision among the subjugated. See Bayart 1993, 255–56; Mbembe 1988, 148.