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SITUATING HIS
PEOPLE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH
WITHIN SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATION

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Distinctly African Christians: situating His People Christian Church within social transformation¹

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Abstract

This paper looks at the ways in which His People Christian Church and its congregation have incorporated into their services and activities a variety of performative, graphic and thematic reference points that closely follow contemporary attitudes in the promotion of new identities in South Africa. Such incorporation speaks of a revalorisation of the local that balances more international institutional links, while confirming underlying ties with the trajectory of the nation-state in the post-apartheid era. The discussion first considers the history and underlying organisation of His People Church before turning attention on the Sunday services of its main Johannesburg venue. What emerges from the subsequent analysis of this 'charismatic Christian' community is a conscious and unconscious dissolution between the sacred and the secular that affirms the sense of contemporaneity at His People Church.

¹ This paper was originally presented at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, in October 2005. The 'ethnographic present' of discussion therefore relates to this period. The author thanks the Institute, its colleagues and especially Lale Yalçın-Heckmann and Virginie Vaté for their comments. Pseudonyms are used for all laity at His People, Johannesburg, but not for public figures such as the pastors or elders of the Church.

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Introduction

Between 2000 and 2003 the front cover of every monthly³ information booklet published by His People Christian Church in Johannesburg featured a tinted photograph of two hands whose palms were placed together in a traditional attitude of Christian prayer. Irrespective of the different colour tinting, however, it was always clear to even superficial inspection that the right hand was substantially lighter in skin tone than the left. This visual abbreviation for racial unity and tolerance aptly embodies Nelson Mandela's iconic phrasing of post-apartheid South Africa being a "Rainbow Nation"⁴. The promotion of ethnic plurality is but one of several strategic factors that have quickly made His People (HP) well known within the wider community of independent churches in South Africa. The following discussion therefore looks at the ways in which a church and its congregation have incorporated into their services and activities a variety of performative, graphic and thematic reference points that closely follow contemporary attitudes towards the promotion of identity in South Africa. This incorporation speaks of a revalorisation of the local that balances more international institutional links. It also confirms underlying ties with the trajectory of the nation-state that belie a recent emphasis on the transnational dimensions of Pentecostalism as evidenced by Corten and Marshall-Fratani (2001). HP's emphasis on being African and South African is in direct line with other forms of affirmation in South African society today. Important post-apartheid legal reforms have paved the way for employment equity in the workplace.⁵ The African National Congress (ANC) government's policy of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) has sought to redress the 'racial' balance of corporate ownership and leadership, while South African diplomats have led a group of African nations in tabling the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), visionary strategy for economic growth and political stability throughout the continent. Not surprisingly, the spirit of these various policies and initiatives has taken rhetorical form in President Thabo Mbeki's own calls for an 'African Renaissance'.

How does one grouping of South African Pentecostals differentiate themselves from other Christians and society at large? What sort of socially and culturally symbolic elements feature in the services of a church at the forefront of developing Christianity in Africa? These and other questions will be answered by drawing upon ongoing anthropological fieldwork conducted since February 2003, mainly in Johannesburg, but also in Cape Town. Much of the participant observation component of this research has involved the routine attendance of Sunday services as well as small-group prayer and discussion meetings called "home cells" in the parlance of HP. This methodology has been supplemented with attending exceptional church activities that range from a religious conference to a Friday prayer evening, from a reflective weekend retreat in the country and a special Christmas Carols service to a Broadway-style musical performance depicting the triumph of Jesus Christ over Satan. Off-site interviews with both church leaders and laity have given depth and motivation to many of the observational findings. On a cumulative basis, these insights probe a very particular and especially potent institutional connection between religion and social change in contemporary South Africa, one that draws upon threads as diverse as racial and ethnic plurality, African nationalism and even contemporary management thinking.

³ In February of 2004 His People, Johannesburg began to publish this brochure every second month. From August of 2005 it has appeared every three months.

⁴ The phrase entered popular and political discourse after being used in Mandela's presidential inaugural address on 11 May, 1994.

⁵ Employment Equity Act of 1996 and Labour Relations Act of 1996.

The main aim of my discussion will be to situate His People Christian Church, Johannesburg within South African society as a whole and to explore the potency of this connection. First, I will present a contextual background to Pentecostalism before turning to an institutional overview of the HP congregation. Third, I will discuss socially symbolic elements that form a broader visionary frame for the regular Sunday services. Last, I will relate one particularly dominant theme in this religious community to the wider social and cultural context of South Africa as a distinctly transitional society. The promotion of this theme can be understood as a form of conscious social insertion that carries with it primary values regarding the place of the Church in the future of the country rather than – as Comaroff (1985) discusses with respect to Zulu Zionism – the place of a congregation vis-à-vis the history of the country. My discussion ends with the suggestion that at least some of the success of His People relies on its ability to appropriate secular symbols and practices that tap into values of social reconstruction and economic achievement that are an integral part of wider elite relations in post-apartheid South Africa. This conclusion has some parallel with Max Weber's classic analysis of new forms of religion and his pairing of religious innovation with the expansion of capitalism in Europe (1958). In contrast to Weber's Protestants, however, His People has clearly fostered perspectives that reinforce their religiosity with more localised forms of secular expression and identity sensitive to their own social context. While I do not suggest that this religious community promotes some form of "civil religion" in the vein of Robert Bellah's (1967) overt connection between politics and religion in the United States, it is nevertheless clear that Bellah's (1970) later criticism of a mechanistic perspective between the sacred and the secular bears need of greater ethnographic scrutiny, especially when played off of more recent reflections such as those of Casanova (1994) and Asad (2003), the former of whom has considerably furthered the debate on the 'secularisation of religion', while the latter has taken an anthropological stance on religion in the context of modernity, particularly with reference to Islam.

Pentecostal Religion in South African Context

The leadership of His People Christian Church, Johannesburg acknowledges a certain kinship to the larger Christian denomination, but a Senior Pastor like Roger Pierce can also hesitate to confirm specific allegiance with either Pentecostalism as a whole or the so-called Charismatic Movement by firmly noting to me that "We don't like to be pigeon-holed in that way (...) I would not call us (...) 'Charismatic' or 'Pentecostal' – we are Christian".

This sense of general independence is an important part of the HP community and the way it seeks itself as striking a new path for faith. Yet in analytical terms, it remains necessary to understand the Church as one of a growing number of Christian-based congregations that fall within the broader Pentecostal tradition of worship to which a quarter of the South African population were already affiliated by 1980 (de Grouchy 1995: 98). Although categorisation is a matter of debate (see Frahm-Arp 2001: 43–60 *passim*), the largest of these Pentecostal congregations in South Africa is the South African Zionist Church, which counts over 6 million members drawn from among the country's population of approximately 45 million. Each Easter weekend, some 2 million members of its congregation converge on the town of Pietermaritzburg to hold the largest gathering of Christians in the world (Synan 1997: 284). In the process, they also produce vast traffic jams that clog up the entire north-east of the country for several days, a physical as much as spiritual testimony to their influence within South African society.

The issue of social influence is central to examining how many Pentecostal congregations understand their place in society. In this sense, it is important to recall Garner's suggestion that Pentecostal churches act as agents of social change in South Africa (2000: 310). HP is much the same as many of its Pentecostal brethren in this respect. Church leaders actively exhort members to bring about social and cultural change by promoting Christianity through both religious and secular means. For this reason, Martin (2002: 2) differentiates between Latin American and African Pentecostalism by their respective emphasis on pluralism and volunteerism respectively. In extension of this perspective, His People members are encouraged to become role models within wider society – especially in the arena of business. After all, the original slogan⁶ for His People was:

“SAVING THE LOST, LOVING THE SAVED, RELEASING LEADERS”.

This slogan combines the idea of personal salvation, which is the basic thrust of mainstream Christianity, with that of leadership. Such leadership is understood to be necessitated in a time of troubles, a part of the millennial tendency of Pentecostalism as a whole (Cox 1995). The wider implication is that His People is about changing society as much as saving it, and that this is achieved by one becoming a leader in society (i.e. a part of the elite) in order to use one's position for both individual inspiration and collective evangelism. Reference to an *elite* is not casual here, for like the Ghanaian case analysed by Gifford (2004: 115), there is an underlying expectation of achievement within the congregation that is both encouraging of secular success and self-defining of its membership. This elite sensibility marks out HP in contrast to many other Pentecostal congregations such as the South African Zionist Church precisely because of its unique positioning within the class hierarchy, rather than in fundamental opposition to it. In this sense, the religiosity of HP does not constitute a “symbolic reconstruction” (Comaroff 1985: 253) of the self through belief, but rather a symbolic (re)alignment of the self with the nation-state. It also marks out a very different source of membership for the congregation given the traditional association of Pentecostalism with the poor and the marginalised. This is doubly true in the South African context where Pentecostalism has been previously analysed as a response to the exploitation of the urban proletariat (Sundkler 1961) or as a belief system that provides “indigenous workers with an order of symbols, concepts and practical forms that [have] promised novel resolutions to the problems of living between the impoverished worlds of rural subsistence and wage labour” (Comaroff 1985: 177). While such Marxist analyses see Pentecostal congregations as substantially hemmed in by modernity or its set of marginalising power relations, HP's alignment – if not alliance – with the forces of capital puts it squarely within modernity as a central framework of action and reflection.

At HP, evangelism is but a prelude to guiding individuals to “*really* know the Lord Jesus, to know Him – not just to know *of* Him”, as one congregant put it to me in the course of a five-hour ‘prayer evening’. For Pentecostal Christians, such knowledge rests in an unmediated relationship with God, one that is sealed by a personal religious conversion and usually materialised through full immersion baptism. This relationship becomes manifest in the phenomenological gifts of the Pentecost that allow the Holy Spirit to communicate with and directly through a believer. These phenomena are of a fundamentally “emotive style” (Frahm-Arp 2001: 8) and when they are

⁶ When in 2004 the larger association of Pentecostal churches to which His People is now affiliated underwent what amounted to a corporate ‘makeover’ in marketing terms, His People churches in Johannesburg and elsewhere introduced the new macro-slogan: “EVERY NATION IN OUR GENERATION”.

anchored in the experience of “signs and wonders” (Martin 2002: 4) have led congregations to fall under the label of Charismatic Christians. Such charismata include the experience of waking dreams, revelatory visions, speaking in mystical or foreign tongues, prophecies, miraculous healing through prayer and ‘filling with the Spirit’, as well as more mundane forms of expressive praise and worship (Synan 1997: 283).

It is for their glossolalia that Pentecostals are best known among other Christian denominations, not least because it was deemed to be the ultimate marker of a post-conversion Spirit baptism by Charles Fox Parham, the American instigator of the Pentecostal movement.⁷ This central doctrine was drawn from Parham’s interpretation of the Bible (Acts 2: 4) and his conviction that the action of speaking in tongues followed directly from the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ who were ‘baptised in the Holy Spirit’ on the day of the Pentecost (Synan 1997: 93–94). In this sense, classical Pentecostalism adheres to a form of double baptism (Synan 1997: 254), one that is externally induced (through submersion in water) and internally manifest (through speaking in tongues). Most Pentecostals therefore see glossolalia as “initial evidence” (Synan 1997: 254) of full spiritual renewal. Charismatics further understand it as a separate meta-language of prayer, one which allows the believer’s spirit to communicate directly with God outside of intellectual mediation (Anderson 1990: 55). While the leadership of His People does not classify the Church as specifically Charismatic (or even as Pentecostal *per se*), most of the congregation accept speaking in tongues as a highly emotive, divinely inspired language of communication with God in the vein of Corten’s analysis (1997: 37). As such, it is understood to be the presence of the Divine, and the only readily visible, religious symbol of God as present in humankind.

There are differing historical perspectives on the origins of Pentecostalism in South Africa. De Gruchy links its beginnings to Johannesburg and the first Zionist congregation of 1895, along with Petrus Le Roux’s later Zulu congregation in Wakkerstroom (1995: 85). In contrast, Maxwell asserts that it arrived with five Los Angeles missionaries in 1908. He adds that the early religious services were both interracial and interdenominational at first, although these dimensions soon changed with the establishment of the mainly white Assemblies of God in 1914 (Maxwell 1999: 246). This history of segregation (after an early promise of multi-racialism) was paralleled within the Apostolic Faith Mission and the Full Gospel Church, the two other main Pentecostal denominations of the time (de Grouchy 1995: 90). As throughout organised religion in the Republic, it would soon be reinforced by the increasing institutionalisation of apartheid policies. This was especially so after the gazetting of the so-called ‘church clause’ of the Native Laws Amendment Bill in 1957 – which effectively tried to force racial segregation among church congregations by restricting black people from attending services in white residential areas (de Grouchy 1995: 95).

The apartheid regime favoured the Dutch Reformed Church, a dour offshoot of Continental Calvinism that became the official state religion. The clergy of the Dutch Reformed Church, many of them members of the secretive *Broederbond* society, were ensconced firmly within the Afrikaner (or Boer) community and were closely allied with the racial prejudices of the apartheid system (see Fawcett 2000, also de Grouchy 1995: 89–92). In contrast, most of the traditional, English-speaking Christian churches eventually aligned themselves behind the democratic

⁷ Parham laid the groundwork for Pentecostalism through his Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas founded in 1901. The Azusa Street Mission established in 1906 by William Seymour is considered to be the first formal Pentecostal congregation. This genealogy is contested by Ojo (1996: 93).

opposition. Pentecostal congregations, however, sat on both sides of the political divide – and many ignored it altogether. This latter indifference arose from a “negative reaction to the social and political activism of the mainline churches” but also fed their congregations with members ambivalent about the secular role of the church (de Grouchy 1995: 101).

Within the Pentecostal tradition, the leading Rhema Bible Church actively supported the Pretoria regime through both sermon and prayer (Gifford 1991: 36–37). While there is no clear connection between Pentecostal divisions over apartheid and the fact that many initial converts in South Africa came from the “Dutch Church” (Maxwell 1999: 250–251), Synan has noted that:

Rhema is best known for its strident preaching of the gospel of prosperity, which certainly has a political role in South Africa, diverting attention from the system [of apartheid] which disproportionately favours the Whites, and telling good Christian Whites that faith will bring them even more wealth. (Synan 1991: 36)

Ironically, with respect to such ‘prosperity theology’, the end of apartheid and a change in political fortunes roughly paralleled a jump in materialism and consumerist tastes that has not abated since. This escalation was fuelled in part by the cessation of trade sanctions after the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, as well as globalisation pressures and the reincorporation of the South African economy into international trade flows. Upon coming to power, the ANC’s rejection of its former socialist policies in favour of neo-liberal growth and investment strategies encouraged a significant shift in the new elite’s attitude towards the accumulation of wealth (see Adam, Slabbert and Moodley 1998). Such a revision of elite mores has had significant impact upon society as a whole, and today it is the politician turned businessman, or the corporate giant, who is the new icon within South African society from top to bottom.

Current and former political leaders who have exchanged the rhetoric of class consciousness for that of the boardroom have found ideological sympathy in suburban Pentecostal churches that preach a familiar ideology of moral austerity and social progress on the one hand, yet clearly appreciate the trappings of material success on the other. In such a way, South Africa is very much a part of a growing affinity between the broad spectrum of ‘born-again’ Christians and the economic expectations of post-liberation society. This affinity has parallels with other parts of Africa, including both Zimbabwe (Gifford 1991: 46–80) and Ghana (Meyer 1998a; see also Gifford 2004).⁸ As the Ghanaian case demonstrates, there may be a closer connection between post-colonial society and Pentecostal attitudes towards consumption than previously considered (Meyer 1998b).

For many converts, an important attraction to Pentecostalism is its general adherence to the puritan ideals of the ‘holiness’ movement whereby believers are expected to lead lives of moral rectitude, abstaining from alcohol, drugs, tobacco, gambling, antisocial behaviour and premarital sexual relations. In relation to the last issue, a good example is that of Jenny Stevens (29) and Johannes Nortje (34), both of them HP congregation members. This couple decided to refrain from all forms of sexual contact during the period of their courtship. As Jenny told me:

⁸ The link between the political and religious right can be anticipated from the United States context. South Africa itself has long been a major concern for the Christian Right there, largely because of the country’s former status as a battleground in the fight with communism in the form of the ANC (Gifford 1991: 33–36).

We don't embrace each other, there is no caressing (...) [and] we do not kiss deeply, with open mouths or our tongues (...) because this naturally leads to a certain (...) hotness (...) [to] temptation.

Such personal discipline is a key feature of Pentecostalism, and many converts are through it attracted to the parallel promotion of a strong work ethic and promises of financial independence. In South Africa, this theme has a cultural twist, for material frugality is reinforced in the lives of converts in a double fashion. First, they become included within a new religious community that stresses intra-sociality and encourages participation in church activities that are either free or inexpensive. In this respect, new members can easily save money while they “devote themselves to God”, and quickly find that the church provides a wide range of charitable, evangelistic and educational activities to fill up their spare time and more. Such involvement is taken by members of the congregation to signal a parallel increase in religiosity. At HP, the importance laid on such dedication is best expressed in a comic incongruity noted by Bill Bennot, one of the Johannesburg congregation's founding pastors. In his characteristically exuberant style, Pastor Bill exclaimed during a Sunday service:

Whether you raise the dead, or raise chickens (...) it's a full time commitment!
(Ps. Bill Bennot 25.12.2003)

Second, many Pentecostal churches give prominence to ideas of the family in a way which binds members of the congregation into a soft structure of self-reward that has important cultural underpinnings in the South African context. At HP, this prominence takes partial shape in an emphasis on the family in its nuclear form – in line with the larger “family” of the congregation itself. Upon joining HP, such emphasis coincides with a loosening of broader kinship and other social bonds in favour of the new-found church relationships that balance, and sometimes substitute, familial and friendship ties. This shift in a convert's attention is important when considering the majority, black population of the country for whom strong familial bonds have traditionally functioned to disperse personal capital to the extended family (see Spio and Groenewald 1996), not least through the inchoate yet potent philosophy of *ubuntu* which places considerable stress on a sense of community and redistribution (see Mbigi and Maree 1995). Consequently, by joining a community that claims equal if not greater priority in moral and financial terms, converts find that they may circumscribe the dispersion of capital. Together, these circumstances improve a church member's chances of increased capital accumulation. Such accumulation is one of the key factors said to affect South African economic development in general, and acts as an important material foundation for Pentecostal churches like HP, which sustain the Biblical practice of tithing,⁹ not least by creating the social framework for their members to husband financial resources for personal investment in any number of economic opportunities that might come their way.

Among most Pentecostals, economic achievement and success is seen as a gift from God and a mark of faithfulness. As Dorian Wrigley (36), one of the ‘Elders’ of His People and the director of a financial management company with a significant Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) profile, explained it to me:

We believe that rewards on this earth are a sign of blessings from the Lord.

⁹ Tithing is the presentation of ten percent of one's income to the church based on *Genesis* 14:18–20.

These rewards are publicly conspicuous among Pentecostal congregations like His People, not least because church leaders understand material consumption to constitute one of the most visible signs of God's Blessing on earth, as well as being a visible encouragement to the poorer laity. In this sense, modern Pentecostalism is diametrically opposed to Weber's analysis of Protestantism. This is because Pentecostal congregants like those of His People do not just work hard and save hard; they work hard and spend hard. Partially on this basis, Frahm-Arp (2001: 2) goes so far as to propose an entirely new category of Pentecostal churches in Africa based on their historical establishment and their adoption of what amounts to "capitalism, globalisation, multiple religious systems, conflicting political parties and an inexhaustible supply of must-have consumer goods". Although my own investigation posits this categorisation as problematic given its over-emphasis of consumption, it is not entirely surprising that one of the five Pentecostal congregations briefly surveyed by Frahm-Arp in 2001 was indeed, His People, Johannesburg.

His People, Johannesburg

On an organisational basis, His People Johannesburg is part of a (growing) collection of His People congregations in ten major South African cities, three neighbouring countries (Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and overseas (the UK and Austria). These congregations are in turn linked to a wider international association of Pentecostal churches known formerly as *Morningstar Ministries* with its headquarters in the southern United States. In 2004, this larger association (with affiliates in 46 countries) changed its name from Morningstar to *Every Nation* – in line with a more secular and global image that directly harnesses the association of modernity with the building block of the nation-state (see Gellner 1983, also Smith 1996). This modernity and secularity feed directly into the expression of a range of social ideals that His People members promote quite candidly. These ideals are summarised by a set of five "core values" that are nominally religious in character but also serve to focus a broader range of general community inclinations that include a strong bias towards business forms, rhetoric and achievement. This bias is fully consonant with broader currents in South African society, and especially powerful given Johannesburg's role and reputation as the continental bastion of capitalism (Czeglédy 2003). As a consequence, it is not entirely surprising that HP has explicitly fostered a set of "core values" whose schemata if nothing else, draw substantially on the sort of institutional or community-wide value system as identified by the organisational theorists Deal and Kennedy (1984), and now drawn up by major corporations worldwide in order to anchor their respective 'corporate culture'.

Historically, His People, Johannesburg is the second His People congregation in terms of institutional founding – although its local success and regional influence has led to a vague form of joint leadership with the 'mother church' in Cape Town. By size, the main Johannesburg congregation numbers some 3500 active members drawn from a metropolitan catchment area far beyond the strictly local community of the suburb. Some half of the congregation regularly attends one of three Sunday services held weekly at the church. Parallel services occur at two separate university campuses nearby and, as of October of 2005, began to take place at a satellite venue on the East Rand (which lies just beyond the main metropolitan region). The most recent HP location is in Soweto, however, where Sunday services are sited in a building that still functions as a *shebeen* (unlicensed tavern) on Saturdays.

The holding of university services is no mere afterthought for two reasons, one historical and the other structural. First, the birthplace of His People was in Cape Town's university quarter of Rondebosch in 1988, and this background has since become a foundation stone for institutional identity. At the time, this circumstance led to a very young – but also very 'white' complexion to the original congregation. More recently, this mono-ethnic dimension has been more than balanced by the sort of upwardly mobile, mixed race couples and black tertiary students that this church actively encourages as a sign of its progressive nature – particularly given the history of racial segregation found within South African Pentecostalism (Anderson 2000: 58–63). This unwritten policy takes form at events such as HP's recent 'Men on Fire' weekend camp, where the ethnic/racial makeup of the participants was partially pre-determined through the invitation process itself: the organising pastors were instructed to ensure a level of diversity beforehand, in aid of establishing and strengthening communication across ethnic components of the congregation.

Such heterogeneity differentiates His People from many other religious congregations in South Africa that remain bounded by ethnicity. On the level of social politics, it also ties HP directly into contemporary forms of racially oriented political transformation on the one hand and (far more indirectly) affirmative action opportunities on the other. In this way, His People, Johannesburg actively seeks to mirror the composition and complexion of society at a time when the issue of representativeness has become such a trenchant institutional requirement in South Africa. This simultaneity was best expressed by Senior Pastor Roger Pierce after he took over the "stewardship" of the Johannesburg congregation from Bill Bennot in 2004:

Multiculturalism (...) this is a church of many [cultures].

It's a far better product, if you are going to use that word.

We are going to build a multicultural church (...).

(Ps. Roger Pierce 7.11.2004)

This is indeed how many of the congregants feel about HP. As Lebo Ntshali (24), a Sowetan-born economics graduate now working for an insurance company in Johannesburg reminded me:

I [would] go so far as saying that [HP's congregational composition] is reflective of what you would find in South Africa. Because the different types of cultural backgrounds, different cultural groups that you find in church are the very same cultures that exist within the country itself. So, I would say that it is symbolic of what the country *should* be. And (...) yeah, you might still find people working together in companies and from cross-cultural backgrounds, but it doesn't necessarily guarantee and mean that they are working together *effectively*. And I feel that within the church that's where you get to – to the nitty-gritties of *why* I have to get beyond the skin colour. I am not only doing it because the guy would provide financial benefit for me – as it would be in a business setting. So it's more of a, not a partnership thing which is forced onto people because of their work activities. It is a personal choice, because you choose to go to church or not to go to church. And you have your reasons. Because going there doesn't make you immune to every other race that you would find there. Because you have to interact with those people. Because that is the culture of His People.

Second, the primary form of recruitment into His People has always been through its university campus presence. Such a presence originated in traditionally ‘white’ universities, but over the years the church leadership has avidly supported the creation of ‘ministries’ on every campus in the land. This campus presence is an important part of the strategic direction that this religious community is taking in terms of cementing its future, for its avowed intention is to preach the ‘Word of God’ to the youth above all. At universities across the country, His People student activists organise recruitment drives during the tertiary registration period. They are reputed to focus their attention on students from the professional faculties who will graduate into high earning and high status jobs: law, medicine, engineering, and especially, commerce. Throughout the academic year, His People student groups host various topical seminars in order to attract further attention amongst the inquisitive student body. In March of 2005, for example, His People churches even hosted a collective ‘Student Leadership Camp’ in Bloomfontein, the former judicial capital of the old South Africa and the birthplace of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Mentioning J.R.R. Tolkien in the same sentence as a Pentecostal church sounds inappropriate – until, in March 2004, I participated in a special, two-hour evening service dedicated to showing how Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy should be understood as a parable for the Christian fight against the evil. In the innovative fashion that is routine at His People, the sermon was visually punctuated by selected scenes from the first movie instalment (*The Fellowship of the Ring*), all viewed on the church stage’s projection screen. Iain Shippey, the lead Pastor for the evening, told the congregation that the *Lord of the Rings* cycle is essentially a form of myth. He added that myths have an important purpose in our lives, principally because of what they remind us about. He said that all myths contain three messages: 1. Things are not as they seem, 2. The world is at war, 3. You and I have a part to play.

These three statements compact a wealth of theological and material implications. In short, they emphasise to the devout (i) their personal place in a Christian world separate from the earthly illusion around them, one which can only be understood in the literal truth of the Bible, (ii) the real presence of evil and the prize of eternal salvation – or everlasting damnation, and (iii) the active role of the individual in deciding the fate of humanity. As Gifford has suggested, there is room here for comparison with New Age religions in that Pentecostalism also preaches “success through a positive attitude” (Gifford 2001: 37). Additionally, they both employ ‘self-help’ idioms, and lay primary stress on the individual as well as on personal decision in a way that is consistent with the broader project of affirmation involved in social transformation. Such decision is twofold in my experience at His People. First, it refers to the point of conversion whereby individuals give themselves over to God. Second, it challenges members of the congregation to expand their activities within the Kingdom, as the wider community of Christianity is often termed. After all, as Pastor Shippey put it:

Frodo and Sam are part of a greater story and they have a part to play (...) God chooses some of the people we least expect to accomplish the greatest of things.

Performing Faith: the Sunday service

The preceding mention of the term ‘audience’ underscores the essentially performative nature of much of Pentecostal Christianity. It also underlines why its services can fall under the “best tradition of spectacle” noted by Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]: 99). Performative, because it is clear that as an essentially experiential tradition, Pentecostalism involves behaviour that is at least mimicked if not learnt and practised. In the loose but evocative terms of Schechner, such behaviour “isn’t free or easy” (1985: 118); moreover, it falls squarely within the tradition of assertion and affirmation that HP fosters as a whole, and which is so strongly contextualised by larger transformations in society. At HP, the performance of faith is best represented by the Sunday services, which are but a single facet of the many institutionalised activities – or “ministries” – of its energetic congregation. Nonetheless, Sunday services act as the main focus of attention on a collective level, largely because they facilitate and confirm a believer’s connection with God. Not least, they institute common experience across the entire congregation, acting as the chief occasion for religious conversion and affirmation, moral instruction, prophetic communication and other forms of divine inspiration. In this sense, His People corresponds directly to Charismatic Christianity, wherein religiosity “has to do with experience *of* God rather than thinking *about* God” (Smail 1993: 50). This fundamentally experiential quality ensures that ritual objects, especially concrete symbols, do not play a part in the worship of the service, instead, they act as key reference points for its broader institutional identity as a part of society on a social and cultural level – yet separate from it in religious terms.

The largest Sunday services for His People, Johannesburg are held in their main venue located in the elite residential suburb of Parktown North. The northern location of this church is spatially central for the wealthy residents of Johannesburg who have largely forsaken the inner city and interstitial areas as a residential abode (Czeglédy 2003). In another sense, the location also follows contemporary sensibilities of urban status that allow visitors to visually partake of the affluent surrounding residences. From this perspective, the very space of their church bestows significant social status upon its more aspirant congregation members.

The four-storey brick building of the church resembles a multipurpose meeting hall (both inside and out). It features a large, double volume auditorium significantly bereft of decoration. Instead of wooden benches, it is filled with rows of comfortably upholstered, tan coloured chairs subdivided into three major blocks. In the absence of a fronting altar there is a stage with a plexiglass lectern. Without the conventional backdrop of stained glass windows, one’s attention is often drawn to the hanging video screen on the back wall. Only the two over-sized flower pots and the monochrome blue and red banners that flank lectern and stage background are evidence of the ceremonial function of the space. There is no religiously significant, sacred symbol present, not even a cross or crucifix such as might fall within Turner’s formal assessment of ritual symbols (Turner 1972). According to Susan Roberts (34), one of the first members of the Johannesburg congregation formed in 1997, the minimalism of the overall decoration allows a person “to focus your attention during a service”. In a parallel vein, Senior Pastor Roger Pierce (41) understands most traditional religious iconography to be a distracting impediment to “real worship”. Nevertheless, what decoration there is, acts as a visual frame for the inevitably smooth performance that follows.

Generally, the introduction to a Sunday service is no more than a short welcome from the band leader. Sometimes it is simply: “Welcome! Let’s stand together and sing and praise the Lord!”. The

congregation quickly gets to its feet and the church band (on stage) plays the first of between five and seven songs that take up at least the first 35 of the 90 minute service. The combination of singing and intermittent prayer that follows is known categorically as “praise and worship”. As such a title suggests, it makes little distinction between song, prayer and other forms of communion with God. This is in line with Calley’s argument that Pentecostal congregations do not differentiate between belief and ritual, and that rituals are “performed for their own sake” as “expressions of the solidarity of the church, a celebration of togetherness” (1965: 72, ix-x).

The members of the His People band are young musicians, mostly in their late 20s. The music produced by drummer, electric guitarist, keyboard player, saxophonist, percussionist and seven others is a varying combination of folk, gospel and rock music that is drawn from American and British Pentecostal sources (Frahm-Arp 2001: 75). The mainly soft rock-based material eschews traditional hymnals and is highly derivative of contemporary pop music. Some tunes even feature the familiar slow-fast-slow interludes in the grunge-rock technique made popular by Seattle’s *Nirvana* in the 1990s. On rare occasions, a large acoustic horn (fashioned out of natural bone) is blown to punctuate some of the songs. The horn sounds like some ancient bellowing call, and members of the congregation have informed me that it mimics the sort of instrument used by the earliest Christians – a way in which HP consciously connects itself to the robust purity of a Biblical past untainted by later corruptions. This interpretation closely follows Martin’s declaration that:

(...) Pentecostalism is primitive Christianity as it emerged two millennia ago on the despised margins of the Roman Empire: lay empowerments of the Spirit in alliance with aspirations to holiness and wholeness. (Martin 2002: 4)

It is a perspective that reminds any Sunday service observer that the dreams of an African Renaissance are as much about the past as the present and, more specifically, how both service and national vision are in step with the general idea of a newfound appreciation for ancient traditions and a re-awakening of Africa. In illustration of this point, one does not have to look any further than when a large West African double-drum is incorporated into the music to give it that primordial, ‘authentic’ African feeling, one which always ensures a warm reception from the congregation. This reaction comes irrespective of ethnic background, and it exemplifies how HP has become adept at harnessing the contemporary appreciation for non-European cultural reference points in post-apartheid South Africa. Even more so, a heavy drum and bass soundtrack in the style of South African township music called *kwaito* provided the aural backdrop for the 2004 Christmas dance show put on by HP’s youth organisation.¹⁰ This unconventional choice of music is not arbitrary, for *kwaito* is the most iconic symbol of South Africa’s youth culture today (Stephens 2000), and its usage sends a powerful contemporaneous message to the audience. In the context of post-colonial attitudes to freedom of expression that celebrate the restricted in time (under apartheid) and space (to the townships), this sort of performance has greatest symbolic impact upon black members of the audience sensitive to such dimensions. It galvanises the congregation to express shouts, whistles, ululations and a variety of other vocal affirmations of the sort that audibly mark HP services with a unique badge of celebration that combines performance and culture with a newly inclusive sense of the nation as community.

¹⁰ The Youth Ministry has its own fashionable name in tune with the contemporary penchant for conspicuous misspelling among the young: *Hiz Diziples*.

The congregation knows most of the songs by heart and sings along – there are even ‘greatest hits’ that quickly become recognisable to the patient listener. A regular feature of most services is at least one song sung in an indigenous language (with words and their translation projected onto the stage screen simultaneously so all can at least mouth the lyrics). In Johannesburg, this song is generally in isiZulu, while at His People, Cape Town it is in !Xhosa. The use of each language strategically reflects the major ethnic group of Gauteng and the Western Cape provinces respectively, just as it draws the congregation into celebrating the country’s ethnic diversity by way of participation in the performance itself.

While the band plays, the lead soloist belts out her vocals and the backup singers add their talents to the show. In the auditorium, a happy sort of delirium quickly takes over. Voices ring out, people sway to the rhythm clapping and shuffling their feet; they raise their hands in the air, and several literally dance in the aisles. The physicality of the congregation’s response is infectious and according to Corten (1997: 30 *pace* MacRobert 1988: 30–31) Africa’s major contribution to Pentecostalism as a whole. Its favour among the congregation points towards a nearly conscious objection to the narrow set of performative responses to be found in mainstream Christian churches. Additionally, such unscripted dancing gives an archaic stamp to the proceedings that might fit into R.R. Marett’s famous claim that “(...) savage religion is something not so much thought out as danced out” (1914: xxxi) – were it not that here such performance is understood to re-create the freedom of expression considered a part of early Christianity and its close(r) connections to God.

Invariably, one or two church members rush to the front where two baskets of brightly coloured flags have been placed. The enthusiastic members lift the flags and wave them about in joy to the music. In the absence of a distinct liturgy, the very spontaneity and randomness of such activity is an indication of the range of informality evident throughout the service: children run up and down the aisles, friends talk to each other at random, tired (or lazy) congregation members sit down to rest while many of their neighbours dance in front of their chairs or kneel and pray in the aisles.

As I stand in my usual place at the south-east tip of the seating formation, I begin to count the congregation members with their hands outstretched in now familiar gestures of spiritual supplication. Their facial expressions and unconscious body movements have superficial, but important cross-cultural resonance with indigenous forms of “ecstatic religion” (Lewis 1989) and spiritual healing in Africa (Katz 1982: 93–116 *passim*). Most of the congregation are still singing, but already some have begun to speak in tongues, an activity which is the most symbolic religious act at His People. In so doing, they make the connection between the Sunday service as collective celebration, and as individual exhibition. Ironically, these persons thereby become the most involved participants in the service just as they experientially remove themselves from the rest of the audience by demonstrating the Divine in them. Their expository drama demonstrates Maurice Bloch’s (1985) claim that fundamentally, ritual refers to the other-worldly, that it is something removed from historical events and that it is a form of discourse that has no referential meaning to the everyday life. At the same time, such glossolalia exemplifies the power of ritual symbols as “a mobilization of energies as well as messages” (Turner 1972). For these believers, it demonstrates the truth of their faith as much as symbolising it. This congruence is important when considering notions of modernity. So Asad informs us that although modernity:

(...) employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, of cruelty and health, of consumption and knowledge. The notion that these experiences constitute ‘disenchantment’ – implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic and the sacred – is a salient feature of the modern epoch. (Asad 2003: 13)

Given this interpretation, it is ironic that the Pentecostal embodiment of the sacred – where religious experience as ecstasy strips away the cognitive veneer of material reality to reveal an absolute truth that is transcendental – follows a parallel path to such modernity.

Invariably, the last song is a ‘slow’ tune; I suspect that it is designed to calm down the crowd and prepare them for the serious matters ahead. I feel like I’m at a high school dance, and the disc jockey has just begun to end his set for the night. As the music fades, the Pastor’s voice delicately enters its last bars, becoming one with the melody while delivering a solemn prayer. He finishes gently, in a nearly reflective tone, then adroitly switches gears by asking people to greet and shake hands with each other before handing over the microphone to a colleague. What perks up the audience at this stage is very specific: a quick call-and-answer dialogue between pastor and congregation spoken in anywhere from three to seven different languages one after another. This verbal skipping game plays off of traditional forms of rote communication within indigenous communities and deeply resonates with the way in which anti-apartheid political rallies were once begun; it moves from one language to another so that the audience is both challenged and confirmed in the only way that collective identities are represented in the new South African Constitution – through the multiplicity of 11 official languages.

There comes an emotional lull as the junior pastor goes over a list of announcements that detail current Church activities. Some of them involve mention of ongoing “missions” to other African countries, including aid to the poor – but always by spreading the Word. After the announcements, the lead Pastor intones a prayer from the front of the stage, asking the congregation to bow their heads “as the offering is taken up”. The keyboardist plays a quiet tune as the ushers pass along the royal purple offering bags in which people deposit coins and paper money, as well as the more significant cheques placed in tastefully printed envelopes provided by the Church. The ushers themselves can be instantly identified by their fashionable leopard print vests which present a mnemonic cue reminding any South African of the country’s ‘Big Five’¹¹ wildlife attractions, and the way in which such references to the animal kingdom remain the only uncontested symbol of national pride. Of course, such symbolism has wider reach, for by incorporating this most conventional of themes representing ‘Africa’ to itself (and others), it also takes advantage of one of the leading aesthetic trends in design and interior decoration in post-apartheid South Africa.

At His People, Johannesburg, the sermons that follow the offering both challenge the congregation and morally coach it. They last about 30 minutes and invariably begin by questioning the faith of the audience, then letting them know that through their belief anything can be achieved. The pastors rarely speak of explicit miracles, but often use episodes from their own lives to illustrate and confirm Divine Providence at work. While the stories may differ, the rhetoric and metaphors employed within them are consistent. Sports, business, warfare and agriculture turn up

¹¹ Lion, elephant, water buffalo, leopard and rhino.

repetitively – and sometimes even in combination, such as when Senior Pastor Bill Bennot reminded the congregation that:

We didn't just show up on Sunday for a few years (...)
 We did it in the trenches!
 When God exports [faith] into the marketplace of life (...)
 It's the real thing!

Irrespective of language, however, a number of dominant (but not exclusive) secular themes are present from sermon to sermon as well as in the closing prayer, which generally include: retaking the city (of Johannesburg), building the nation (of South Africa) and professional success and influence through God's graces. In addition a preoccupation with Africa stands out, and in particular with an Africa opposed to its international image of poverty, disease, warfare and destitution. For instance, a visiting pastor from Harare proclaimed during the Church's two-day 'conference' that, in religious terms "(...) the wealthiest continent in the world is Africa!" (Ps. Tom Descule 11.04.2003).

In similar terms, His People, Johannesburg's founding pastor once informed the congregation that "I believe that Africa is the greatest sowing field on the planet!" (Ps. Bill Bennot 21.03.2004).

This positive message was taken even further through the lyrics of a choral performance at HP several months later, when a youth choir sang:

We are the children
 Africa's children
 We look at the dawn
 Because it's an African dawn!
 (10.10.2004)

Such a message strikes a resonant chord with church leaders and laity alike. It affirms their place in the World as much as the Kingdom; it gives them purpose as much as pride in strongly declarative terms. Of course, a level of patriotism is often a part of such language, for South Africans like to think of themselves as the leaders of their continent and, if not economically, the moral leaders of the world. A belief in such a role is shared within the congregation inasmuch as this belief provides an uncontested platform for the assertion of a common national identity. At the same time, it stands as a call to religious arms, a challenge to lead the evangelistic crusade. As Roger Pierce, the Church's second Senior Pastor prophesied more recently:

I believe that South Africa will become a light to the nations!
 This has already happened with our leaders!
 (Ps. Roger Pierce 7.08.2005)

This statement implicitly plays off the internationally iconic stature of someone like Nelson Mandela – while also commenting on the fact that His People pastors have increasingly been asked to take a leading role in the wider federation of Every Nation churches worldwide. In this way, a set of parallel structures can emerge between the words of the sermon, the pastors and their success, and the projection of South Africa as a moral leader in global terms.

The Aptness of Belief and the Nation-State

The active promotion at HP of a commitment to the local – through symbolic elements and references which concretise the national and continental totality – runs counter to Appadurai's (1997: 10) more general observation that it is the failure of the nation-state's promises of modernisation that has encouraged the peoples of the developing world to re-assess and re-align their lives within global modernity. This is not least because in South Africa it is the state itself that has re-claimed the legitimacy of citizenship through a new political dispensation. Simultaneously, it has embarked on providing material advancement through a set of economic restructuring programmes that feature both affirmative action employment policies and the transfer of capital to formerly disadvantaged population groups, in addition to a broader reintegration of South Africa into the world economy.¹² As a consequence, both democratisation and capitalism now function as primary and popular tropes for the re-vitalised nation-state as well as the community of the nation, irrespective of successes or failures in either field. This is important when reflecting on the essentially millennial dimension to Pentecostalism, especially when it comes into conjunction with nation-building as the primary meta-project of the state.

At His People, Johannesburg, the millennial dimension is evident in the conventional ideas of individual and collective salvation to be found throughout Christian thought, as well as in their articulation with a range of important parallels that fall within the ideological frame of re-birth that infuses Pentecostalism on a more fundamental level. This is particularly so when considering that ideas concerning the restoration of an original Christianity are paralleled by the restoration of majority power. Similarly, the self-conception of the congregation as a 'true' (or real) community of the faithful is paralleled by the development of a true (or truly representative) community of citizens. Both of these parallels find their potency within HP through its institutional commitment to becoming emblematic of the new South Africa in ways that dissolve the boundaries of the sacred and the secular while linking the micro-community of this church to the macro-community of the imagined nation. The Church's discourse on secular issues, its affirming practices, as well as conscious inclusion of an 'Afro-positivism' in line with the country's new elite (to name but a few dimensions), all meld together in a leap of faith already mandated by the religious nature of this community. For such reasons, reintegration into the world economy finds particular favour among those Pentecostal congregations in South Africa that seem to intent on "re-sacralizing the assumptions on which [capitalism] depends", as Coleman (1995: 161) puts it when discussing prosperity theology in a Swedish context. At HP, an integral part of such re-sacralisation is the nation-state itself, for the Church is intent upon increasing Christian influence within both economy and polity in its expansion of the Kingdom:

I believe that we are coming into a new season of prosperity for the church.

I believe that it is coming about as we do business with God.

This church is meant to be a prophetic church for the nation.

(Ps. Roger Pierce 6.07.2003)

¹² These include Economic Aid and Recovery (GEAR)

While this sort of statement does not stipulate the aim of creating a specifically ‘Christian state’ in South Africa, it does advocate a commitment to social engagement above the local level, one which is very much in tune with Casanova’s observations on a wider “de-privatisation” of religion in general (1994: 5–6 and *passim*). Such de-privatisation depends substantially on the idea of a “re-politicisation” of both the religious and moral spheres, one whereby:

Religions throughout the world are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between nations, states, civilizations, and the world system. (Casanova 1994: 6)

Not surprisingly, at HP the wider project of evangelism (and one of its ‘core values’ noted above) is often spoken of in tandem with many of the greater projects of the nation-state, particularly those to do with government themes such as the Rainbow Nation and the African Renaissance. Whether this linkage is an institutional response to external conditions of power, or a matter of this Church heading the crest of a broader wave within society is difficult to tell – and perhaps unwise to judge at this early stage. What is clear is that His People seeks to actively dissolve any boundaries between the sacred and secular, to reinvest the public domain with religious concerns (à la Casanova 1994), and to re-inject religion into everyday life – irrespective of the successes or failures of the nation-state. In point of fact, at His People the most significant failures of the state in South Africa (crime, corruption, service provision, the alleviation of poverty, etc.) are ascribed to the workings of Satan more than any human or institutional agent. Consequently, politics can remain a part of any given sermon while the mention of controversial political figures is conveniently filtered out of the public discourse. In turn, Satan is concretised as a real presence in the material world – but very differently from Taussig’s (1980) symbolic analysis of peasant resistance to capitalism. More precisely, he is an active force to contend with, one which is often invoked as working through a variety of unnamed agents who may (or may not) be conscious of such motivation. This ascription is reminiscent of the sort of missionary attitudes towards diabolism described by Meyer (1999) in her historical ethnography of the Ewe. Partially because of it, neither the nation-state nor its acceptance of global capitalism take on the sort of negative connotations described by Comaroff (1985: 168 *pace* Sundkler 1961) in the case of Zulu Zionism and the way in which religion reconciles the individual with their social marginality by symbolic and ritual means. Instead, HP embraces both the nation-state and capitalism, acting as a bridge to both sacred health and secular wealth. This perspective fits neatly into the placing of His People at the centre rather than the periphery of class dynamics in South African society. I would additionally suggest that it also invokes the sort of conscious (and unconscious) realignment of the self with power that has always been a part of transitional societies undergoing radical transformations of both polity and economy. After all, who wants to be on the margins of society when joining a congregation such as HP instantly puts one in touch with a range of community and business leaders who are genuinely interested in the welfare of the congregation?

With such a perspective in mind, Coleman’s (2003) recent mention of a ‘re-sacralising’ religious revival nods at one of the major debates in contemporary studies of religion, namely that dealing with secularisation. At the risk of oversimplification, the discourse on secularisation has two legs;

one deals with diminishing numbers and the other focuses on declining influence (Casanova 1994). The greatest interest now lies in the latter, whereby religion seems to have lost many of its societal and public functions and become just another subsystem of activity within the increasingly compartmentalised lives of people (Dobbelaere 1985: 3). This thinking is consonant with general perspectives on modernity that draw on Weber's vision of a transformed society wherein traditional religious authority and the rule of arbitrary power has been superseded by secular rational authority and functional logic based on merit and procedure. In many ways, this fits neatly into the success stories of His People leaders and the way in which the Church has both literally and symbolically chosen to 'work within the system' of public symbolic devices (both visual and rhetorical) – whether that be the business sector or the nation-state. This decision poses important contradictions for HP in that the South African state also supports increasing recognition for traditional medicine in South Africa as well as forms of authority that, among indigenous communities, entails an avenue of religious tolerance deemed unacceptable by many conservative Pentecostal churches such as His People. Ironically, the significant exceptions to this bias are the Zionist congregations whose essentially syncretistic, religious traditions are, in a culturally grounded way, much more of "a refinement of Christianity in relation to African experience" (Kiernan 1995: 122).

Nevertheless, the symbolic cues in the preceding discussion add up to a significant argument about the way in which His People has incorporated changes in wider South African society that favour certain cultural motifs, forms of performance and even ideological values. The design aesthetics, the use of certain languages, the incorporation of specific musical instruments and styles, the themes of the sermons, etc., act as important points of reference in a community that has consciously rejected the conventional symbolic embroidery of organised religion just as many earlier independent African churches did (see Kiernan 1995). These symbolic elements also point towards a significant overlap with the grander cultural mythology of reassertion that has gripped the imagination of the nation since then Vice-President Thabo Mbeki first mooted the idea of an African Renaissance.¹³

More than a thirst for recognition within the geo-political community, the idea of African Renaissance posits a level of cultural re-appropriation – even if it incorporates a little (or a lot) of the 'invention of tradition'. For contemporary Pentecostal congregations familiar with employing a veritable "*bricolage* of extremely heterogeneous elements" (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001: 1), such coincidence does not go unnoticed. At His People, Johannesburg, it is another opportunity to differentiate their congregation by the incorporation of essentially secular elements in a sacred setting that serves to remind the audience of a specific identity without threatening the real play of ritual and belief that takes place *within* the believer rather than through external symbolic devices. In this sense, there is no contest between symbol and practice – even when considering a history whereby "the making of modern South Africa has involved a long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 4). This is not least because such secular symbols have remained so within the Church and its practices; they are present but muted, important for corporate identity but uncontroversial in the wider social sense and, ultimately, ritually insignificant.

¹³ Proposed in several speeches in 1998 (see Farred 2003).

All Sunday services end with a so-called 'altar call' of prospective converts to the front of the stage that parallels Coleman's research in Uppsala, Sweden (2003: 18–19). The altar call asks people to "take the Lord Jesus into your hearts" and incorporates a form of collective prayer led by the lead pastor for the service. It ends in a quick good-bye blessing from the pastor, and the congregation walks out of the auditorium. Half of them walk pass a series of visually sophisticated banners that first appeared in July 2005. These banners articulate HP's "mission statement", "core values" and various ministries in a clearly corporate (e.g. 'business') style. The other half of the congregation passes by the only piece of pure decoration that is not a part of the stage set. It is a huge, fabric print depicting the emblem of His People Church. In a way that is fully consonant with how HP has culturally positioned itself in South African society, the emblem is surrounded on the left by leopard spots and on the right by zebra stripes surrounding the oversized likenesses of two and three lion cubs respectively. The whole vividly portrays the single, distinctly African motif that remains completely unchallenged in a country still divided by history: the animal kingdom. Ironically, given its visual prominence, the mural is never referred to by the leadership, nor is it a subject of discussion within the congregation. Like the other essentially secular symbols that infuse the referential system of His People, it remains a badge of contemporaneity rather than a sign of faith.

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