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Adriaan van Klinken, 'Politics and Christianity in Africa', in *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, ed. by Mark A. Lamport, p. 645-646 (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018)

POLITICS AND CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

The relation between Christianity and politics in Africa is informed by the wider African religio-cultural setting where religion is deeply intertwined with, and in fact inseparable from, politics. Politics is about power, and due to prevalent religious modes of thinking about the world this power is widely perceived to be spiritual in nature (Ellis and ter Haar, 2004). Christianity fits in this wider picture in a complex way. On the one hand, in the colonial period and afterwards, missionary Christianity introduced a Western, more secular worldview. Here, religion was not necessarily strictly separated from politics (after all, colonial administration and mission came hand in hand), but the relation between political power and spiritual power was not perceived as direct as in the African worldview. After independence, most African nations adopted the formal principle of a separation between church and state. In the post-colonial period, when in several countries more or less dictatorial regimes, or systems of 'one-party democracy' emerged, church leaders not infrequently appeared among the main critics of government, and the former mission churches contributed to the development of democratic systems and cultures in Africa (Gifford, 1995). On the other hand, contemporary popular (in particular, Evangelical and Pentecostal) forms of Christianity in Africa have shown to be intensely political, in ways that blur the boundaries between 'the secular' and 'the religious', as well as the formal separation between church and state (Ranger, 2008). In Zambia, for instance, President Chiluba, identifying as a born-again Christian, soon after his election in 1991 declared the country to be a 'Christian nation' – a clause that was later enshrined in a preamble to the Constitution. This statement, welcomed by Pentecostal leaders but criticized by the Catholic Church and the Council of Churches in Zambia, gave rise to a sense of 'Pentecostal nationalism' that continues to shape Zambian politics. In Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, the enormous growth of Pentecostal churches has caused a religious revolution with profound political consequences. The 'political spirituality' (Marshall, 2009) of Pentecostalism – characterized by an emphasis on individual and collective conversion, and by a dualist worldview in which the world is the battlefield between God and the Devil, and in which power subsequently is deeply spiritual, very much like in the African traditional religious

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worldview – shapes the way born-again Christians engage in politics, envision national redemption, and perceive for example Christian-Muslim relations and controversial issues such as homosexuality and abortion. Time will show how the different trajectories of navigating the relation between religion and politics, and between church and state, will develop in African Christianities.

References and Resources

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