I had a visitation. An angel appeared to me, and he showed me the image of a tree. I went to paint the image of the tree on the wall of the police barrack’s coffee shop where I was helping out at the time. It became the tree of life. Nobody knows it, but this became the new emblem of the police.” This is how Amanda, a 50-something unemployed white Afrikaans-speaking woman, began her account of how she got involved in community policing in the neighborhood of Sophiatown, Johannesburg. As she was talking, it soon became clear that Amanda was not only an active member of the local community police forum, but she was also a fervent disciple of the 7 Trumpet Ministry, a Pentecostal church. She saw herself, in her own words, as “the living testimony of God’s concern for the police.” For her, community policing was a medium to bring a message of salvation.

This chapter is an account of how community policing facilitates privileged access to the police for a Pentecostal group, through which the group establishes a form of religious rule in the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown by collapsing the categories of law and religion. While this takes place in competition with other community organizations and, one could argue, by undermining state rule, it does not provoke much outright conflict or public disapproval. Through crafty tampering with the process of representation in which the disciples become the police to the community and the community to the police, they are able to steer
clear of such conflicts. In fact, on the face of it, they appear to be the localized embodiment of the very democratization efforts of a state that hopes to legitimize its rule by appearing to enforce the will of the people. Such subtle displacement of the state is further aided by the fact that in the neighborhood space in which the disciples operate, a secular, rights-oriented state is otherwise experienced as withdrawing or unintelligible.

In its current institutional and flagship-for-democracy form, community policing was introduced in 1994. It entailed the setting up of “community policing forums” (CPFs), in which the residents of a particular policing precinct come together to discuss the security problems of the area and liaise with the police about these issues. Its introduction formed one of the main interventions leading to the transformation of the apartheid police force into a more democratic, law-abiding police service. It was the new dawn of democracy in South Africa, and there was to be a change of heart among the police. To Pentecostalists like Amanda, this “change of heart” spoke directly to the Pentecostal paradigm of a saved person’s rupture with a sinful past, while “crime-ridden communities” were seen as sites in which to fight the battle between good and evil.

As we shall see, a surprisingly convergent grammar was found between a secular national policy of democratic law enforcement and a practice of faith. Through this convergence, police and Pentecostal disciples forged an intimate partnership, in which the disciples pray for the police and help with administrative chores, and the police follow the disciples’ directives regarding where to intervene. This partnership serves to channel police powers not simply toward the prevention of crime as defined by the law but also toward a particular moral order and construction of a community of the faithful. Enforceable social rights that were meant to replace patronizing forms of state tutelage are being translated back into forms of pastoral care; instead of reducing state violence and statutory crime, as the credo of community policing has it, the police are encouraged to use their awe-inspiring violence as a law-making power to found a religious sovereignty with its own lines of inclusion and exclusion, territoriality, moral laws, and a clearly circumscribed body politic.

This redirection of policing powers toward a religious sovereignty has taken place through crafty tampering with the idea and practices of (political) representation by the Pentecostal disciples. Representation has been an important element of community policing, a central claim of which is that through its process the police do not act in the name of an oppressive regime, but come to carry out the (democratic) will of the people within a specific locale. Such claims to popular sovereignty are also why community policing remains so resilient in its ability to conjure up the possibility of more justice for the people and, through this, the apparent promise of more legitimacy for the state. Yet the “will of the people” has to be