


The unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa: Reflections and recommendations

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This article reflects and makes recommendations on the recent unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa. Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa refer to churches that have crossed denominational boundaries. These churches idolise the miraculous, healing, deliverance and enactment of bizarre church performances often performed by charismatic and highly influential spiritual leaders. There have been unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches that include, among others, the eating of grass, eating of snakes, drinking of petrol, spraying of Doom on the congregants and other experiences. There are many possible theological, psychological and socio-economic explanations for these unusual practices. Given the facts that many South Africans experience various socio-economic challenges, it is argued here that the socio-economic factor is the main explanation for the support of these unusual practices. The unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa are critically unpacked by looking at various churches where the incidents happened. The possible theological, psychological and socio-economic explanations for such practices are outlined in detail. Recommendations are made based on the scientific findings on the unusual practices.

Introduction

Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa refer to churches that have crossed denominational boundaries. In addition, these churches idolise the miraculous, healing, deliverance, success and the enactment of bizarre church performances often performed by charismatic and highly influential spiritual leaders. The unusual practices such as eating of grass, eating of snakes, drinking of petrol and spraying of Doom on the congregants within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa caused the Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL) Rights Commission¹ to start a debate on the commercialisation of religion and abuse of people's belief systems. The practices have also caused the CRL Rights Commission to ask if religion should be regulated.

CRL Rights Commission (2016) decided to undertake an investigative study to:

- Investigate and understand further issues surrounding the commercialisation of religion and traditional healing.
- Identify the causes underlying the commercialisation of religion and traditional healing.
- Understand the deep societal thinking that makes some members of our society vulnerable and gullible on views expressed and actions during religious ceremonies.
- Assess the religious framework and its relevance to deal with the prevailing religious challenges.
- Formulate findings and recommendations that address the status quo on commercialized religion and traditional healing. What is the spread of religious institutions in the country? What various miraculous claims are made by religious leaders and traditional healers regarding the powers to heal and make miracles? What form of legal framework regulates the religious and traditional sectors? (p. 3)

This article makes a valuable contribution to such an investigative study by reflecting and making recommendations on the recent unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa. The unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa are critically unpacked by looking at various churches where the incidents happened. The possible theological, psychological and socio-economic factors for such practices are outlined in detail. The purpose

1. CRL Rights Commission is the commission for the promotion and protection of the rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities.

here is to demonstrate that the support for these unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa is mainly caused by socio-economic factors. Recommendations are made based on the scientific findings on the unusual practices.

Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa

It is important to understand classical Pentecostalism in order to have a better understanding of Neo-Pentecostalism. According to Kgate (2016:138), classical Pentecostalism refers to a movement that believes in salvation through confession. Classical Pentecostalism believes in the baptism in the Holy Spirit followed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. The Holy Spirit baptised person will live a holy life. The saved person is patiently waiting for the second coming of Jesus. As such, the gospel of classical Pentecostalism is a full gospel.

As opposed to classical Pentecostalism, Khanyile (2016) says that:

Neo-Pentecostalism idolizes the miraculous, healing, deliverance; success and the enactment of bizarre church performances often performed by charismatic and highly influential spiritual leaders. Neo-Pentecostals are 'new' Pentecostal in orientation because they are said to be trans-denominational (not bound by denomination), socially relevant, unorthodox, non-dogmatic and cosmopolitan- as compared to their *Classical Pentecostal* forerunners. Neo-Pentecostalism reflects a popularised rendition of Christianity that provides for the disgruntled third world peoples through provision of psychological and practical aids. The movement helps people survive both socially and psychologically. Neo-Pentecostalism provides participation, support, emotional relief, and sense of belonging. (p. 15)

The Study Committee Report on Neo-Pentecostalism (1975) states that:

Neo-Pentecostalism is essentially a revival movement within the confessional and traditional churches. The report continues to say that participants commonly testify of a former hunger, emptiness, powerlessness, loveless, aloneness, unfulfilled life, deadness carnality that has now been overcome. They profess an experience of the living Jesus, who before was hidden for them behind the doctrines, liturgies and unspiritual atmosphere of the churches. They now testify to having the joyful assurance of salvation, the desire for prayer and praise, the freedom to testify and witness, liberation from bondage to sin, the power to live holy lives in the service of Jesus, a delight in the word of God, a need capacity to love, a desire for Christian fellowship and a peace that they have never known. (p. 403)

Neo-Pentecostalism is a social movement, one of collective action in pursuit of a clear objective, with a distinct ideology and at least some organisational structure. At the same time, there are the 'social causes' behind the rise of the movement that are largely to do with the ability of fulfilling needs for individuals and social groups. The developments within Neo-Pentecostalism have, in this respect, dealt with aspects of deprivation largely, but not exclusively, among sections of the middle classes. The link between deprivation and

neo-Pentecostalism has been a popular theme for the support of this movement (Hunt 2002:4). Neo-Pentecostalism is currently changing Christianity very powerfully. The religion of salvation becomes a human-centred programme for the attainment of health, wealth and success (Simojoki 2002:271).

These are churches which emphasise ecstatic possession by the spirit. Yet these very features, which are taken as being most African, are in reality the most Christian aspect of these churches. They spring directly from increasingly strong tendencies in world Christianity in the late 19th and 20th centuries. They spring in fact either from anti-establishment Christian Pentecostalism, as it developed in Europe and North America, or from evangelical tendencies within the major mission churches themselves (Siegel 2013:7). Neo-Pentecostalism has emerged as a transformative force whose impact on civic and public life is growing. These developments have ushered in new changes and shifts in respect of the relationship between Neo-Pentecostals and issues in civic and public life, particularly in the realm of politics which changed both in fundamental and significant ways (Parsitau 2014:27).

The Neo-Pentecostalism revolves around personalities. It is championed by dissenters, often from mainline churches, who believe that their spiritual gifts are choked by rigid structures of ecclesiastical authority. That element of 'dissent' is a strong feature in African and other forms of Pentecostalism around the world (Mochechane 2016:6). African new Pentecostalism in general is the tendency to reconstruct religious geography through the construction of religious camps; these churches buy up large expanses of land, sometimes measuring well over 10 square kilometres, and construct a range of facilities such as auditoriums, schools, guest houses, dormitories, presidential villas (for VIP guests such as politicians), banks, gas stations and hospitals. These camps, which often constitute an 'alternative city', function to showcase a Pentecostal leader's charismata, authenticate the claim to divine authorisation, and produce the brand of Pentecostalism through a series of weekly or monthly and yearly ritual activities when certain events are held on regular basis (Ukah 2007:17).

These churches are known for their refusal to affiliate with established denominations in South Africa. Some of these churches also refuse to be part of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). They are also known for ministering relevantly to the needs of the people as opposed to classical Pentecostalism that is perceived as western and irrelevant. These are churches that offer an alternative to daily challenges of public life like sickness, joblessness, poverty, etc. These churches also offer a range of prayers for the affluent so that they can protect their wealth and keep on growing economically.

Deliverance remains central in South African Neo-Pentecostalism; the importance of tongues diminishes in comparison to the ministry of deliverance. Neo-

Pentecostalism fits well with the traditional practice of seeing material objects infused with spiritual power, particularly the power to protect and heal. Neo-Pentecostals take the power of amulets and fetishes with utter seriousness – and consequently reject them – but also provide alternatives in the forms of anointing oil, blessed water, calendars or handkerchiefs (van den Torren 2015:113). Resane (2016:2) concurs that these churches are mostly charismatic with Pentecostal features such as casting out demons, healing the sick, with proclivity towards deliverance from any form of bondage such as poverty, unemployment, marital needs, promotion at work, childlessness, bewitchment, etc. Africa in general took to this revival extremely well. The movement of manifestations took different directions and acts of ‘miracles’ further by bringing some extreme manifestations that have left the African Christian Church in wonderment.

It is the ministry of deliverance that has given a rise to Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa. Congregants in these churches believe that they are bound by different kinds of demons that classical Pentecostalism cannot provide solution for. Congregants fall prey to unusual practices in search of deliverance in these churches. Deliverance has been done before by the use of anointed substances like water, oil, bracelets, stickers, etc. What is new within the Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa is the unusual practices like the eating of grass, eating of snakes, drinking of petrol, spraying of Doom on the congregants and other experiences.

These series of unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa are mainly reported on social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. The unusual practices are sometimes broadcast on public channels. These recent developments within the Neo-Pentecostal Christianity in South Africa have attracted the attention of international media houses such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), etc. The unusual practices within Neo-Pentecostal Christianity are critically unpacked by looking at various churches where the incidents happened. The churches include Rabboni Centre Ministries led by Pastor Daniel Lesego, End Time Disciples Ministries led by Prophet Penuel Mnguni, Mount Zion General Assembly (MZGA) led by Pastor Lethebo Rabalago and Incredible Happenings Church led by Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng.

Unusual practices within Neo-Pentecostal Christianity

Pastor Lesego Daniel of Rabboni Centre Ministries

According to the Rabboni Centre Ministries website, Pastor Lesego Daniel was born on 15 May 1972. He grew up in Garankuwa Zone 5 (a township north of Pretoria and/or Tshwane-South Africa) and finished his tertiary education. He started the ministry after spending much time in the presence of God. Lesego Daniel is gifted in healing the sick, prophesying and teaching the Word. He has been in full-time ministry since 1999, under supervision of different men of

God, who paved the way for him to start the ministry. He founded Rabboni Centre Ministries in November 2002 (Rabboni Centre Ministries 2017).

Pastor Lesego Daniel of Rabboni Centre Ministries engaged in a series of unusual practices in his church. Lesego Daniel, a suave and wealthy-looking young man, is becoming famous because of his outrageous miracles. Lesego Daniel scrupulously motivated his congregants into the outrageous acts of eating grass and gulping petrol as symbolic gestures of accessing God (Maluleke 2014). The God of Lesego Daniel asked young women and a few young men to eat grass. And they did. The same God later desired members to partake in the drinking of petrol and again the young women took the lead (Maluleke 2015:39).

The Star reported that drinking of petrol was quite unfortunate because fuel is corrosive when ingested and not only does it affect the intestinal region, but it also affects the nervous system. It causes excitement, as though someone has taken drugs. That would explain the strange behaviour reactions after ingestion in the people who drink petrol. Drinking petrol also posed a danger to the respiratory system, resulting in difficulty in breathing and pneumonia, among other issues. The eating of grass is equally unfortunate because humans could not digest it as doing this requires a special enzyme, such as those found in the digestive systems of herbivores. Humans do not possess these enzymes (Star 2014).

Lesego Daniel instructed his members to eat grass because he claims to have received an instruction from God by the Holy Spirit. Lesego Daniel proved the point that he was instructed by God by stating that no one got sick by eating the grass (SA Local Newspaper 2014). According to *The Sowetan*, Lesego Daniel also instructed his members to eat grass because they will receive a blessing after obeying such instructions. Lesego Daniel shocked people when he told his congregants to eat grass and drink petrol to get blessings. These barbaric acts must be condemned because church is supposed to be a place where people seek protection and strength. The pastor needs to minister to and run the church properly (Sowetan 2014).

It is more shocking that there are people who still support the pastor for engaging in such acts even when they pose danger to humanity. One of the congregants at Rabboni Centre Ministries was quoted by *The Star* as saying that the pastor is a son of God who was sent to heal people’s souls. The congregant said that ‘I believe in Pastor Lesego and everything he does’. The congregant continued to say that people can have doubts, but the pastor has proven himself over the past years. One of the women who drank petrol and became ill was now fine. According to the congregant, people should stop badmouthing the pastor and the church (Star 2014).

The question is: ‘why people would support the eating of grass and the drinking of petrol?’ Is it a norm that when pastors engage in unusual practices the congregants remain loyal even when such practices pose danger to their health?

Are there any theological, psychological or perhaps socio-economic factors behind the support of these unusual practices? Lesego Daniel might be perceived wrong by the public but his congregants still perceive him as the holy man of God. He is called for their healing and deliverance. He is called to prophesy and teach them the word of God. The question remain, what is the rationale behind this support?

Prophet Penuel Mnguni of End Time Disciples Ministries

Prophet Penuel Mnguni of End Time Disciples Ministries, apparently mentored by Pastor Lesego Daniel in the performance of miracles, ordered church members to eat snakes and performed other unusual practices in order to prove that nothing is impossible with his God (Maluleke 2015:39). Other experiences which called for the attention of the CRL Rights Commission reported by the media included the feeding of live rats and snakes to his congregants and even locking some of them in a deep freezer, driving over people, etc. There have been numerous other unusual practices that have been reported as being the norm in other religious circles (CRL Commission 2016).

The *Business Guide Africa* reported that Penuel Mnguni commanded a woman to enter a deep freezer that was on a high freezing point and ordered her to fall into deep sleep. Thirty minutes later, he opened the freezer and asked the woman to come out. When she was asked how she felt, she said the refrigerator was very hot although the fridge was on. In another incident, the man of God called one of his members simply identified as 'Thabiso' and commanded him 'by the power of God' to turn into a horse and according to the church's Facebook update, indeed it happened. The man of God was said to have ridden on the horse, a perfect replica of Christ's triumphant entry (Business Guide Africa 2017).

Another unusual practice, according to Nehanda Radio, involved people rolling around on the ground. As he delivered his service of the End Times Disciples Ministries Church in Soshanguve extension 13, Tshwane, he stood on top of people, sat on them and walked around on them. Mnguni calls it the church of horror, where horrible things happen. He said he is not ashamed to see women and men stripping half-naked in his church. Not only did they strip off their clothes, they also hissed like snakes. People said they were snakes, calling themselves pythons, mambas, cobras and even anacondas (Nehanda Radio 2015). Penuel Mnguni told his congregation that he had 'the authority to change everything into anything and it will obey because of our authority'. He ordered his members to take off their clothes after which he sat on them, praying. 'He then jumped on a female congregant he was praying for while the rest of the congregation sang and danced in celebration' (Exclusive Nigeria 2015).

On a separate incident in November 2014 reported by *the Citizen*, social media went abuzz with a picture showing women bending with their naked buttocks exposed on the

shores of a beach. It is alleged their the pastor asked female congregants to strip naked so that he can kiss their behinds in order for them to find 'correct marriage partners'. Desperate for marriage, the group of women are seen queuing on the beach while the 'man of God' kisses their behinds (Citizen 2015a). In a similar incident, Penuel Mnguni asked his members to undress in church and start masturbating until they reached orgasms. According to the pastor, the Holy fluid of masturbation would produce a sacrosanct fluid which would make the church floor as sacred as heaven. Church members, both males and females, were heard screaming in sexual excitement and they reached orgasms in church during masturbation. Some fell into a deep sleep after the act (Pulse 2017).

Pastor Lethebo Rabalago of Mount Zion General Assembly

Pastor Lethebo Rabalago of MZGA is another protégé of Pastor Lesego Daniel. They carry the same spiritual and ministerial DNA. The unusual practices by Lethebo Rabalago include spraying the congregants with Doom to demonstrate the power of the gospel. According to a report by CNN (2016), Lethebo Rabalago of MZGA, in Limpopo, has openly posted photographs on his Facebook page of him spraying congregants with Doom Super Multi Insect Killer to cure various ailments. A post was captioned as if quoting a congregant, saying: 'I came here with a pain on my back and stomach. Now, after the prophet sprayed me with Doom I am healed. My nose was blocked for a week, but after the prophet sprayed me with Doom I feel healed. I thank God for healing me'.

According to the *Daily Sun*, Lethebo Rabalago said that there is nothing special about Doom but he has been instructed by the Holy Spirit to use it at the night session. 'I use anything that the Lord directs me to use to heal people', said the prophet. He said he is aware of the dangers of the product but when it comes to the work of the Lord, it becomes harmless. 'It's not about Doom'. 'I can use anything that I'm instructed to use' (Daily Sun 2016). The God of Lethebo Rabalago can instruct him to use anything. His God can make a dangerous insecticide like Doom to be harmless and bring healing to the sick.

The report by the *Daily Sun* continues to say that sprays like Doom contain a pesticide called pyrethrin which can cause health problems if inhaled in large amounts. 'Some of the symptoms caused by inhaling pyrethrin are difficulty in breathing, coughing, seizures which can lead to death, upset stomachs and vomiting' (Daily Sun 2016). But the congregants do not care about the health hazards that may be caused by dangerous insecticides like Doom. All they care about is their healing and deliverance. It does not matter how that deliverance comes. It does not matter what kind of substance the man of God uses as long as the man of God has received an instruction from God to use such a substance.

Tiger Brands responded by saying that they find the practice alarming and extremely concerning, and want to make it

very clear that it is unsafe to spray Doom Super Multi Insect Killer, or any other aerosol spray for that matter, into people's faces. Doom has been formulated to kill specific insects which are detailed on the cans, and the packaging has very clear instructions and health warnings for humans which must be adhered to. Using this product for purposes other than what it is intended for poses health risks and is therefore dangerous (Tiger Brands 2016).

Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng of Incredible Happenings church

Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng is not in the league of Lesego Daniel, Penuel Mnguni and Lethebo Rabalago. He is in his own league and has a different and unique ministry. However, Motsoeneng, who is a leader of Incredible Happenings Ministry, is also known for performing miracles on the members of his congregation that can be categorised as unusual practices. Motsoeneng is believed to have healing powers, and has lured thousands of people, including some celebrities, to his Incredible Happenings church, situated in the east of Gauteng. According to *The Citizen*, it is alleged that he sometimes fondled the private parts of his female congregants while praying for them (Citizen 2015b).

The God of Paseka Motsoeneng, also known as pastor Mboro, would be called the 'divine gynaecologist' as he specialises in women's reproductive organs. Paseka Motsoeneng is often required to touch those parts – which he euphemistically calls 'biscuits' – as he prays for the afflicted women. He is called by God to put his foot on the back of a 'demon-possessed' women crouching before him (Maluleke 2015:39). As part of his ministry for women, according to African News Updates, Motsoeneng launched a new product called holy Viagra. The product is meant to help married couples who have lost the pleasures of married life to rekindle the spark in the bedroom (African News Updates 2016).

Motsoeneng was recently in the news for allegations that he went to heaven and took selfies to prove it. He later told ENCA that he never went to heaven and foreigners are responsible for the selfies that allegedly show him in heaven (ENCA 2016). There was very little response from church leaders (at a national level), calling a fellow pastor to accountability and declaring these actions unbiblical and un-Christ-like. This creates the perception that religious corruption is permissible, while political corruption is unacceptable. The fact that the government has to intervene in religious corruption is an indictment against the Church (In Context International 2016).

Motsoeneng has been roundly mocked online after reportedly charging followers to view his photos of 'heaven'. Motsoeneng, a self-styled prophet, claims a track record of amazing feats. As the leader of the Church of Incredible Happenings, he says he has healed people during sermons and even once claimed to deliver a fish from the womb of a pregnant woman. But Motsoeneng may have gone a bit too far with his latest otherworldly boast (Ming 2016).

Motsoeneng is also known for good things like praying for the rain. According to *The Sowetan*, Motsoeneng said the lack of rain was a 'national crisis' and that rain would fall because 'government is calling on God'. 'The rain is going to fall and it's not about Motsoeneng. It's going to rain not because Motsoeneng is better than other people'. I was going to be better if I was God, but I also call on God:

For the next seven weeks we will be praying for rain and at the end of the seven weeks, there will be no shortage of rain because Jesus said ask and you shall receive. At the end of the seven weeks we will see change if we believe. I'm not the one who is going to bring rain; it's God, said Motsoeneng. (Sowetan 2016:1)

While prophets like Paseka Motsoeneng are also known for good things like praying for the rain for seven days, the majority of people will not remember the good things, but rather the unusual practices. People will not remember that Motsoeneng prayed for the rain and rain came, but they will remember that he often touches women's private parts when praying for them. They will remember a selfie that he claimed to have taken while in heaven. Whether true or not, these unusual practices in Neo-Pentecostalism call for a reflection in order to make proper recommendations. In the next section, we discuss possible theological, psychological and socio-economic factors for the support of these unusual practices.

Possible factors for unusual practices

Theological factors

The unusual practices are a sign of anti-institutionalism; these emerging churches regard themselves as non-denominational as they have no link to either mainline Christian churches or classical Pentecostal churches (Resane 2016:5). While this might be true, it brings to question as to why non-denominational ministries like Grace Bible Church of Bishop Musa Sono in Soweto have never engaged in unusual practices. There are other innumerable ministries in South Africa that are non-denominational but do not feed people with live snakes, make them drink petrol or drive their cars on them. On the contrary, ministries like Grace Bible Church continue to serve people with faithfulness.

The unusual practices are a sign of anti-intellectualism; the current unconventional practices in the New Charismatic Churches are perpetuated by isolation from real academic activities of the theological field (Resane 2016:5). Most of the pastors in Neo-Pentecostalism did not receive proper training in preparation for a full time ministry. This is not about qualification but intense training that includes doctrinal values and administrative duties of the pastor in ministry. A pastor might have a qualification in Theology but it does not mean that they are ready for ministry. Most of the pastors in Neo-Pentecostalism reject such a training, let alone academic activities of theological field.

These pastors take advantage of the value system of Christianity in South African society, particularly among

black people, some of whom have a blind loyalty not only to the contents of the Bible but also to the self-appointed leaders of the word of God called priests, pastors, prophets, etc. Just like honest business people who identify gaps in the market, fake pastors also used the same principle and identified a vulnerable community. Tools of trade include an above-average command of the English language, an edifice for assembly, a pair of shiny suits, loud speakers and public speaking skills (SA Local Newspaper 2014). The demand for bad practices in religion, as practiced by these men of God, stems from material desperation and high levels of ignorance that are born out of cultural and spiritual immaturity as well as from a lack of education; people whose poverty includes cultural, psychological and spiritual bondage are easy pawns for bad religion (Maluleke 2015:39).

These people embrace antinomianism whereby they declare that by faith and grace they are freed from laws of nature and of morality (Resane 2016:5). Jesus said that he has not come to destroy the law but to fulfil the law by grace. In Matthew 5:17–20, Jesus said think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets:

I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach [them], the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed [the righteousness] of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The unusual practices are also a sign of being anti-sacramental. Sacraments signify God's grace in a way that is outwardly observable to the participants. In Christianity, sacraments include the observance of the seven rites of baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, ordination and matrimony. The unusual practices by Lesego Daniel, Penuel Mnguni and Lethebo Rabalago signify anti-sacramentalism because sacraments are replaced with 'divine' directives to eat snakes and rats, drink petrol, display nakedness, walk on devotees' bodies, drive cars over devotees' bodies, spray Doom on congregants, etc. (Resane 2016:5).

These practices seem to undermine and degrade women in society. They are a sign of patriarchy. The first point of similarity is the fact that people who were represented participating in the church performances were mostly women. The pastors mentioned above are all men. Can a woman minister of deliverance perform similar acts? Furthermore, they were all victims of cultural violence, exploitation, manipulation, power, stringent control, patriarchy and diverse manifestations of coercive practice. All these coercive measures were imposed and validated through or by a hegemonic Christian discourse. This highlighted the oppressive and saliently draconian nature of Neo-Pentecostal space(s) (Khanyile 2016:86).

The practices by Pastors like Lesego, Rabalago, Penuel, Motsoeneng and others resemble that of an African Traditional healer. Making people eat grass, undress, drink petrol and touching their private parts is what happens in the African Traditional healer's consulting room. The difference is that unlike these prophets, the Traditional healer will never post her practices on Facebook or YouTube because they are aware that the society will not accept them. These pastors are not afraid of posting these practices on Facebook or YouTube because it makes them famous. These practices turn pastors into celebrities. Hence, they attract other celebrities in their meetings. There are so many good things that churches are doing that never receive media attention. It takes Daniel Lesego, Penuel Mnguni, Lethebo Rabalago and Paseka Motsoeneng to attract CNN or BBC media attention.

Psychological factors

The unusual practices are a sign of hypnotism. Hypnotism is a state of human consciousness involving focused attention and reduced peripheral awareness and an enhanced capacity to respond to suggestion. The term may also refer to an art, skill or act of inducing hypnosis (Lynn et al. 2015:390). During hypnosis, a person is said to have heightened focus and concentration. The person can concentrate intensely on a specific thought or memory, while blocking out sources of distraction (Segi 2012). Hypnotised subjects are said to show an increased response to suggestions.

Hypnotism is defined as the healing of diseases by charms and rituals. The pastors in question may have hypnotised their congregation so that they could control them by using group hypnotic techniques. Through applying drop-the-object-techniques, one is able to hypnotise a group of people; the drop-the-object-technique in hypnotism can be employed using a pen, a pencil or a coin without anyone noticing. It should be easy for the pastors to do it because they can get the congregation to close their eyes for prayer while hypnotising a group; at the appropriate time, one can drop the appropriate object in order to get the process started. Other sounds and noises fade away and the person hypnotised listens only to the hypnotiser (Rekord North 2015).

Neo-Pentecostalism, in different ways, provides psychological and sometimes practical help to the poor, those on the fringes of society, and those who perceive themselves as deprived. Above all, Neo-Pentecostalism helps people to survive both socially and psychologically because it provides participation, mutual support, emotional release and a sense of identity and dignity for a vast range of social groups (Parsitau & Mwaura 2010:5). Hypnosis is unleashed without mercy on gullible and unsuspecting poor in our communities. Taken out of touch with reality into a state where they see everything as 'spiritual', the congregants can be left in a very vulnerable and potentially unbalanced condition. This is a serious concern because those who employ such practices are also likely to lack proper professional training in dealing with the consequences of heightening people's emotions and altering their state of consciousness (Resane 2016:9).

In many cases, the promise of miracles and personal empowerment is directly connected to deeper preoccupations such as personal healing and prosperity. This factor makes people attracted to churches or ministries like Rabboni Centre Ministries, End Time Disciples Ministries, Mount Zion General Assembly, Incredible Happenings and other similar ministries. Through manipulation, people have a sense of hope for the future not knowing that they are being manipulated. The congregants feel empowered, not knowing that they are being hypnotised.

On closer observation, the unusual practices in Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa revolve around people's fears and anxieties. They are afraid of anything, from *Boloi* [witchcraft] to sickness and poverty. They have fear of the unknown, failure, death, etc. They believe that the pastors have the answers to the existential questions life throws at them. Indeed, the prophets shout repeatedly, 'Jesus is the answer'. Many of these people come back to give what is known throughout Pentecostal history as a Testimony. They have experienced a miracle in their life and now they are back to vouch for the 'power' of God (Mochechane 2016:16).

Socio-economic factors

The support for these unusual practices is a sign of socio-economic factors. With fewer than 10 million (out of 51 million) South Africans on medical aid, it means that more than 80% of South Africans have no medical insurance. Add to this scenario an unemployment rate of more than 25%, the 3.5 million young South Africans not at school, work or being trained in any skill, as well as a failing public service and education system. This is an extremely fertile hunting ground for the Lesego Daniel, Penuel Mnguni, Lethebo Rabalago and Paseka Motsoenengs of this world. Without medical insurance, jobs and education, many people are looking for quick, cheap, one-stop permanent solutions to all their health and financial problems (Maluleke 2014).

The mix of poverty, the fear of slipping deeper or back into hardship, ignorance born out of little or no education, nihilistic meaninglessness, desperation, the survival instinct, collapsed social institutions, defunct public systems and services and rampant corruption are all factors that produce the perfect context for a dangerous co-dependent relationship between leaders and followers (Maluleke 2014). In a world sick of disease, social discontent, poverty and unrest, these spaces act as buffer zones to ascertain energy and the will to press on through harsh times, both socially and economically. New Pentecostals are operating as havens of deliverance(s) against multifaceted ills (Khanyile 2016:26).

In the eyes of many, the only way out of this forest of dead-ends is the way of miracles. When jobs and promotions are hard to come by properly and legitimately (you must know someone who knows someone), miracles are the only hope. When you watch whole families die out, one by one, from entirely preventable and treatable diseases, miracles are the only hope. When childless or single women are ridiculed and

blamed for being childless or unmarried, the result is that many young women internalise the guilt and go seeking for miracles and salvation. When bribes are required to obtain an identity document, a house or a social grant, then miracles become necessary (Maluleke 2014).

The middle class go to these churches because they are desperate for another miracle. It is not merely the poor and the marginalised that follow the prophets – some of the prominent people in society also go to these churches because they too need a miracle of promotion. Furthermore, the pastors highlighted above are also affluent. Pastors Lesego Daniel, Penuel Mnguni, Lethebo Rabalago and Paseka Motsoeneng are not part of the poor and the marginalised, but the rich. If given the same substances like grass, petrol, snakes and Doom, one wonders if they would use them.

Conclusion

There have been unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa that include, among others, the eating of grass, eating of snakes, drinking of petrol, spraying of Doom on the congregants and other experiences. There are many possible explanations for these unusual practices. The unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa were critically unpacked by looking at various churches where the incidents happened. The possible theological, psychological and socio-economic explanations for such practices were outlined in detail, given the fact that more than 80% of South Africans have no medical insurance, more than 25% are unemployed, the 3.5 million young South Africans not at school, work or being trained in any skill, as well as a failing public service and education system. This article concludes that the socio-economic factors are the main explanation for the support of these unusual practices.

Recommendations

Religion should not be regulated by government. Instead, government should support councils to manage different religions. It is a constitutional right of citizens to choose their religion and associate with anyone of their choice. The state cannot and should not discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on the basis of religion.

To deal with the vulnerability and gullibility of citizens to bad religion, the CRL Commission can make Christian churches accountable and responsible by belonging to a body like South African Council of Churches (SACC).

The SACC will determine requirements for such affiliations, such as educational qualification. They must establish and outline basic Christian principles which all Christian churches can follow without questions.

Affiliated churches will submit their financial reports on an annual basis to the SACC not as a witch-hunt but as a way of running churches efficiently and effectively.

Affiliated churches will also submit their ministerial reports on an annual basis to the SACC. This will be done to monitor growth and development in religion and to assess areas where the government can be of help.

To make the process easy, the para-churches or independent ministries must be encouraged to associate or affiliate with well-established churches, not necessarily denominations, but any established church or ministry.

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