

Desperation in an Attempt to Curb Modern-Day Prophets: Pentecostalisation and the Church in South Africa and Zimbabwe

Elijah Elijah Ngoweni Dube

Abstract

Pentecostalism continues to spread in Africa like a veld fire. This paper will pay attention to the phenomenon's pervasive presence in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The new forms of pentecostalisation, characterised by modern-day flamboyant 'Prophets' who initiate and run Pentecostal ministries have become the order of the day. Apart from enriching themselves, these 'Prophets' propagate a kind of gospel that is a complete departure from basic Christian teachings. They also use unorthodox means in delivering people from illnesses and in conducting their business in general. This new manifestation of pentecostalism has drawn criticism from both the public and the Church, but it would seem that no one clearly knows how to curb these 'shrewd business people masquerading as Christian Prophets'. While the public has attempted to stage protests against this new form of pentecostalism, the governments in both South Africa and Zimbabwe have also been considering ways of regulating practice in religious organizations.

Keywords

Pentecostalisation
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About the Author¹

Elijah Elijah Ngoweni Dube
*DLitt et Phil (Religious Studies),
Unisa*
Dr Dube has been a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies and Arabic at Unisa since 2010.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

This paper was presented at a Webinar by the South African Theological Seminary on 'Pentecostalisation and faith in the Global South' that was held from 13 to 14 June 2018. The paper was triggered by a #FalseProphetsMustFall March that took place in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, on 14 March 2018. It is thus a response to the rampant extreme forms of pentecostalism in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. The paper seeks to challenge theological educators and theological students to be more responsive to the excesses of pentecostalism and/or pentecostalisation that have become a pervasive element. First, there is an attempt at a definition of terms. Subsequently, based on internet news articles, the paper paints a picture of how extremes of pentecostalism have become so rampant in a way that they seem to be becoming the norm. Towards the end it explores the 'desperation' that appears to be creeping in as far as dealing with these neo-pentecostalism excesses is concerned. Ultimately, the paper proffers what could be possible ways of mitigating the disruptive and undesirable effects of the modern-day flamboyant 'Prophets'.

2. Definition of terms

It ought to be emphasised that pentecostalism is different from pentecostalisation. Pentecostalisation is the broad pervasive influence of pentecostalism (Smith 2018). Pentecostalisation has infiltrated Christendom (the worldwide body or society of Christians). Pentecostalisation is not confined to denominational boundaries, as will be shown below. It is evidenced in or by the fact that a significant number of Protestant Christians today practise a Pentecostal style of worship including speaking in tongues, exorcism, and highly-spirited services (Chesnut 2014) irrespective of whether they belong to Pentecostal denominations or not. Christerson (2012) submits that, 'Christianity (or at least Protestantism) is becoming Pentecostalised.' Straub (2015) concurs with Christerson's assertion.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *Cambridge Dictionary* and the *Free Dictionary* define pentecostalism and/or Pentecostal as relating to or suggesting Pentecost. They note that pentecostalism constitutes various Christian religious bodies whose members aim to emulate the Apostles at Pentecost in being filled with the Holy Spirit. These sources argue that pentecostalism traces its origins back to 1901 in the US. It emphasises Holy Spirit baptism and a

heightened belief in the truth of everything written in the Bible, arguing that this truth can be replicated today.

The *Collins Dictionary*, in line with the above, submits that, 'Pentecostal churches are Christian churches that emphasise the work of the Holy Spirit and the exact truth of the Bible.' It ought to be stressed that there is a fundamentalist attitude attached to what Pentecostals call 'the exact truth of the Bible'.

On the pentecostalisation of Christianity, Kobylinski (2016: 100) avers that,

Over the recent years, we have witnessed a pentecostalization of Christianity around the world. The term pentecostalization refers to the exceptionally fast rise in the number of many types of strictly Pentecostal communities, and the gradual transformation of many other Christian churches and congregations into a single, universal type of charismatic Christianity around the globe.

This further substantiates what has been mentioned earlier – the fact that pentecostalisation transcends denominational boundaries.

It is worth noting that pentecostalism is not a homogeneous movement. It reconfigures and reorganises itself in different contexts. Kobylinski (2016:106) notes that, 'The Pentecostal Movement takes different forms corresponding to the social, cultural and religious identity of its followers; but as a spiritual movement, it has no territorial or denominational boundaries.' That unrestricted and unfettered Pentecostal effect can be better defined or referred to as pentecostalisation.

3. Pentecostalism and Pentecostalisation in South Africa and Zimbabwe

Separating pentecostalism from the 'Prosperity or Health and Well-being gospel' has become very difficult. As part of the excesses of pentecostalism and pentecostalisation, manipulative preachers, pastors and 'Prophets' have become commonplace. These prey on 'desperate' followers or on followers who are 'eager for a miracle'. Africa, with its vast array of economic, social, health, and political problems has provided a very fitting turf for such opportunists.

In line with the above, Vengeyi (2011:223) calls Africa 'one of the fertile grounds for Pentecostalism. ...' In addition, Magezi and Manzanga (2016) argue that, '... this [Prosperity Gospel]

movement tends to grow rapidly where there are challenges such as poverty, unemployment and health problems.’

With pentecostalisation becoming pervasive, fundamentalism which is characteristic of pentecostalism, has been further entrenched. As mentioned earlier, there is a fundamentalist attitude attached to what Pentecostals call ‘the exact truth of the Bible’. This in itself is not utterly bad. The belief that everything written in the Bible is true and perhaps can be replicated has been taken to extremes. This has brought to the fore a brand of modern ‘Prophets’ who are never wrong in what they say or do, at least according to their followers, no matter how unacceptable it may be. Their flock rush to their defence irrespective of what these ‘Prophets’ are accused of.

With reference to Zimbabwe, Magezi and Manzanga (2016) mention that, ‘prosperity gospel tendencies are manifested in three major (among others) preachers: the United Family International Church, led by Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa; the Prophetic Healing Deliverance Ministries, led by Prophet Walter Magaya; and Spirit Embassy (on the decline), led by Uebert Angel.’

This is indisputably not a comprehensive list, but it does give an example of where excesses of pentecostalism have led to ‘Prosperity or Health and Wealth gospel’ preaching.

The belief that Biblical miracles can be replicated has become the basis on which modern ‘Prophets’ base their ministries. Kobylnski (2016:106) submits that, ‘... advocates of Pentecostal movements have developed their own vision of religion, morality, and social life. They believe that supernatural phenomena, such as the miracles and healings described in the Bible, occur just as frequently today, if the faith of the church members is ardent enough.’ Christians who flock to most of the ministries founded and run by modern-day ‘prophets’ in Zimbabwe and South Africa do so in the strong belief that their faith would make them achieve what they long for.

In order to satisfy their over-expectant followers, this modern brand of ‘Prophets’ twist and tweak Scripture to their taste. They use unorthodox means in delivering people from illnesses and conducting their business in general, while enriching themselves in the process. More worrisome is the fact that most of them propagate a kind of gospel that is a complete departure from basic Christian teachings. Fred Khumalo (2016) of *Sunday Times* writes that ‘Pastors are using toxic “healing” and measuring faith in donations.’ There is thus a complex web and an intricate relationship between the hope that these ‘Prophets’ sell to their

followers and the monetary rewards and subsequent wealth they get in turn.

On the news in South Africa and Zimbabwe, often one hears a lot about the weird things the modern-day flamboyant ‘Prophets’ are doing or have been doing. Stories of ‘Prophets’ spraying ‘Doom’ insecticide on their followers in church services—asking congregants to eat rats, grass, drink petrol—touching female congregants inappropriately in deliverance sessions—abusing and raping congregants—profiteering, among others, abound. These have become commonplace. In a sense, the ‘Prophets’ have become ‘untouchables’.

4. Theological Educators and Theological Students’ Role

For me, what is even more troubling is the fact that theological educators and theological students are nowhere to be found in public spaces or in public discourses on the matter in question. In his presentation at the Webinar by the South African Theological Seminary, Dr Annang Asumang rightly pronounced that theological educators have been too elitist and far removed, adding that they need not think of themselves as higher than God’s people. Regrettably, in my view, theological educators have been conspicuously absent in public discourses. What one gets in public media are more voices evidencing pentecostalism’s excesses.

The absence of theological educators and students in public discourses and/or spaces means Christians and non-Christians alike are confronted with the modern-day flamboyant ‘Prophets’ and have to grapple with them on their own. There appears to be no response, or perhaps ‘adequate response,’ from theological educators to what is happening around them. This paper maintains that no one seems to know what to do with the modern day ‘Prophets’, hence the ‘Desperation’ in the title of this paper. Our apparent preoccupation with treating this phenomenon from an elitist point of view, such as publishing exclusively in academic journals where our works are not accessible to the ordinary people has contributed to the ‘desperation’ in the public sphere.

By the above, it is not meant to convey the message that nothing is being done to try and combat the ever-surging phenomenon of the excesses of pentecostalism and pentecostalisation. The voices, however, are few and far-between. For example, in a *news24* article on 26 October 2017, Misheck Makora reports that, ‘Apostle Khaya Maseko of The Salvation Church of the Revival of Faith has condemned other pastors for living it up in the lap of luxury, while

their followers wallow in poverty.’ Maseko warned Christians to be wary of pastors who seek their own glory and not God’s. He was addressing followers at a Sunday rally at the OR Tambo Hall in Khayelitsha, where he warned against false prophets.

On 1 September 2017, *Times Live* reported that Benjamin Dube, a veteran musician and pastor had slammed fake pastors. In this *Times Live* article, Dube is quoted as having said, ‘What is going on in church is disappointing, abominable and disheartening. It calls for the true son of God to stand up and model the true gospel of Jesus Christ.’

Although there are some representative voices speaking up on behalf of the rest of Christendom, it is irrefutable that there has not been adequate response to the regrettable excesses of pentecostalism. The fact that on Wednesday, 14 March 2018, some few people participated in a *#Fake Prophets Must Fall March* in Braamfontein, Johannesburg (Haffejee 2018; Dlamini 2018) sums it all up. Desperation rings loud in this gesture. This desperation is demonstrated in the following respects:

1. There was a low turnout. Hardly 50 people pitched for the march. The protesters marched to the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities to hand over a memorandum against false prophets (Haffejee 2018; Dlamini 2018).
2. One of the ‘Prophets’ (Prophet Bushiri) whose name had been on the posters challenged the marchers, a day before the march, in court to have his name removed from the list of the ‘Prophets’ implicated. He won his bid and the marchers were not allowed to carry banners with his name on them. This is a fitting example of how invincible the modern day ‘prophets’ have become, especially considering the vast wealth that they have amassed.
3. Not much was reported in the media about this march.
4. The very fact that only a handful of people (about 50) felt an obligation to protest against the rise and fame, as well as the abuses and excesses of ‘false prophets’, an issue which has become a very serious one for both society and government, is beyond worrisome.

Desperation can also be evidenced in Zimbabwe on the news that The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (Baz), on 8 April 2018 banned all the country’s radio and state television stations from carrying programmes that advertise ‘prophets’ and traditional healings. The ban was part of concerted efforts by authorities to

clamp down on the increasing incidences of charlatans who masquerade as powerful ‘prophets’ (and traditional healers) (Machamire 2018).

A Zimbabwean news article on 20 June 2017 reported that, ‘Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) secretary general, Kenneth Mtata has blasted “false prophets” for misleading people into believing that the country’s political and economical crisis could be resolved spiritually through certain rituals’ (<https://relzim.org/news/zcc-secretary-general-blasts-false-prophets-for-misleading-people/>).

South Africa has also, for a long time, been considering regulating religious practices and speaking against religious abuses. According to *EyeWitness News* on 14 March 2018, ‘Chairperson of the CRL Commission Thoko Mkhwanazi-Xaluva had strong words of encouragement for those calling for the end of abuse of religion by false prophets who have often been accused of abusing women and children.’ She said this as she received a memorandum from leaders of the ‘False Prophets Must Fall’ march in Braamfontein.

The fact that these bodies have tried to curb and/or regulate the raging fire of invincible and rampant modern-day ‘Prophets’ should send a clear message to theological educators and students. There is a great need for some adequate response to the excesses of pentecostalism. In other words, while we embrace pentecostalism and pentecostalisation, we ought at the same time to be speaking against their abuse.

Theological educators will need to be more participative in contemporary issues bedevilling society at large. Some of the ways which are proposed are the following:

1. Theological educators need to make their voices more widely accessible on what is happening around them.
2. They need to go beyond writing to themselves and to their peers and colleagues while ignoring glaring issues around them clamouring for attention.
3. As much as is possible, they should use public media to counter the rampant proliferation of modern-day ‘Prophets’ (and their teachings), who have no regard for the Lord they claim to serve.
4. Finally, they should refrain from leaving the government and Christian Regulating Bodies to do for them what they themselves could and should do.

5. Conclusion

While pentecostalism and pentecostalisation have been widely embraced across the world and in Africa in particular, the excesses of modern-day 'Prophets' have been worrisome. Some few voices have spoken against the abuses of pentecostalism in modern-day South Africa and Zimbabwe, but there remains a great need for an adequate theological response to the excesses. The lack of such an adequate response paves the way for desperation and to uncoordinated voices attempting to confront the invincible modern-day 'Prophets', in vain. Theological educators and students should aim to be more attentive to issues bedevilling society. They, therefore, ought to step into the limelight and defend publicly what they consider correct from a biblical and theological perspective (1 Peter 3:15). The excesses of pentecostalism need to be exposed and confronted in public spaces and discourses.

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