

The role of ecumenical bodies in curbing abuses in New Prophetic Churches in South Africa



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The proliferation of New Prophetic Churches within the broader Pentecostal movement in South Africa has come with the challenge of the abuse of religion and people's beliefs. These abuses have attracted the attention of the government through the Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities (CRL) commission with calls for the regulation of religion to deal with the abuses. This article worked within the context of Christian ecumenism and explored the role of ecumenical bodies in curbing the abuses in New Prophetic Churches as opposed to the regulation by the government. In this article the ecclesiastical freedom theory is used to argue that ecumenical bodies are better positioned to deal with these challenges facing churches than the government and its commissions. It is suggested that, for New Prophetic Churches to be active in national ecumenical bodies such as the South African Council of Churches, they should be allowed to establish their own bodies to assure accountability. This will be achieved by defining the theory of ecclesiastical freedom, a discussion of the ecumenical bodies in South Africa and their relationship with New Prophetic Churches. In the last section the role of ecumenical bodies in dealing with abuses in New Prophetic Churches will be explored and recommendations made.

Contribution: This article makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourses on the regulation of religion in South Africa through an ecclesiastical freedom theory. It is argued that churches can self-regulate and therefore suggests that instead of regulating churches, the government should rather rely on ecumenical bodies in dealing with abuses in New Prophetic Churches in South Africa. In addition, New Prophetic Churches should be allowed to establish their bodies that will ultimately become part of national ecumenical bodies to assure accountability.

Keywords: New Prophetic Churches; ecumenism; the proliferation of churches; ecumenical bodies; ecclesiastical freedom theory.

Introduction

New Prophetic Churches continue to grow in different parts of South Africa and elsewhere in Africa. However, the proliferation of the church has come with some challenges regarding the abuse of religion in South Africa. The churches are founded by independent pastors who do not see the need to be part of ecumenical bodies within the Pentecostal tradition and in the Christian tradition in general. This becomes a ground for the abuses by some pastors in certain New Prophetic Churches in South Africa, as there is no accountability in such churches. Consequently, when abuses become public, there are no mechanisms to curb it; hence, the intervention of government through the Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities (CRL) commission. Within the context of Christian ecumenism, the ecclesiastical freedom theory is used to explore the role of ecumenical bodies in the smooth running of churches. It is argued government should not be involved in the regulation of churches, but allows it to self-regulate. The main section of this article deals with the proliferation of the New Prophetic Churches and the abuses in a South African context; the second section covers the discussion on the efforts made by the CRL commission in addressing the abuse of religion and their call for the regulation of religion. The third section deals with the discussion on ecumenical bodies in the context of the New Prophetic Churches, and in the last section, the role of ecumenical bodies in curbing the abuses in the New Prophetic Churches will be discussed.

Ecclesiastical freedom theory

Religion can be defined as a form of belief and worship of a supreme being by different religious groups such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and so forth (Vergote 1996:16). Therefore, freedom of religion is freedom of worship, and the freedom to practise one's beliefs. However,

ecclesiastical freedom is quite different from freedom of religion. Vosloo (2008:13) says that 'Freedom of religion is indeed not to be confused with the freedom of the church or the freedom of the religious.' The latter refers to the freedom of different religious groups including the non-religious and atheists in the practice or non-practise of religion (Van der Ven 2010). The freedom of religion gives rights to the people who do not want to belong to a religion or practise religion in their country. Freedom of religion also means that there will be respect for other people's religious views so that one religion is not allowed to dominate other religions. These rights are enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa 1996) through the bill of rights which states that: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion.' Ecclesiastical freedom means that the church should be perceived differently by the government as opposed to other non-governmental and charity organisations. Garnett (2013) states:

The 'freedom of the church' idea presumes and proposes that religion *is* special-or, more precisely, that religious institutions, communities, and authorities are and should be differentiated both from political authorities and from non-state institutions and voluntary associations generally. (p. 49)

Therefore, in the first instance, ecclesiastical freedom theory is used to illustrate that the church should be separated from the government or the power of the state. Article 36 of the Belgic confession states the government should be careful in exercising absolute authority over the church (Christian Reformed Church 2022).

Second, the freedom of the church demonstrates that the church can govern itself without absolute authority or control by the government. Some 'churches' or groups that may be indicated as churches do not serve public benefit or the benefit of society and the state has the responsibility to take care of defenceless victims. However, this responsibility can easily be carried out by the church itself. Garnett (2013:36) explains that the freedom of the church gives it the authority to 'govern and order itself and the limits on the secular power to interfere with that governance'. Kalscheur (2008) adds:

The Church is entirely free to define herself and to exercise to the full her spiritual jurisdiction. It is legally recognized that there is an area that lies outside the competence of government. This area coincides with the area of the divine mission of the Church, and within this area, the Church is fully independent and immune from interference by political authority. (p. 55)

This aspect of the freedom of the church gives the church a voice to speak with authority on matters in which the government will seek the advice of the church. Kalscheur (2008) explains further by saying:

The effective exercise of this aspect of the freedom of the church empowers the church to be the church by serving as a voice speaking out to protect the dignity and transcendence of the human person in the face of state efforts to assert omnipotent omniscience over all areas of human life and human activity. (p. 58)

When the church is not granted her freedom and authority, it becomes vulnerable and cornered, always having to agree with the government even when the government is on the wrong side of the truth. Any attempt by the state to regulate the church is an attempt to rob the church of its prophetic voice towards the state (see Vosloo 2008:2).

Lastly, the ecclesiastical freedom theory is used here to demonstrate that the church can find solutions to its problems including the abuse of religion and of people's beliefs. The government cannot oversee the issues of the church and only the church can find solutions in this regard. Garnett (2013:43) states, that "'freedom of the church" should be seen as requiring not only those secular authorities "abstain" from interfering in religious matters but also that they acknowledge the limits on their jurisdiction over such matters'. However, this does not mean that the church and practitioners of faith should take advantage of this freedom by engaging in the abuse of religion and of people's beliefs. Similarly, the freedom of the church does not mean that prophets and pastors in New Prophetic Churches should take advantage and engage in activities that are against the law or normal church practices. There should therefore be a clear distinction between the freedom of the church that allows the church to function optimally, and the freedom of the church when some prophets take advantage of people and abuse them. In the next section, some of these abuses are highlighted as they occurred in certain New Prophetic Churches in South Africa.

The proliferation of New Prophetic Churches and some abuses

The New Prophetic Churches (Omenyo & Arthur 2013; Quayesi-Amakye 2015; White & Pondani 2022) are discussed in the context of the broader Pentecostal movement in South Africa, but are distinct from other sub-traditions. Scholars have used different categories in classifying these churches such as prophetic Pentecostalism (Chitando & Biri 2016), prophetic ministry (Faimau 2018; Ramantswana 2018; Tsekpoe 2019), and Prophetic Pentecostal Church (Frahm-Arp 2021). The New Prophetic Churches are known by four characteristics, and it should be reiterated that these are not common in other streams. It is known for what is called a forensic prophecy of revealing people's details such as names, identity numbers, street addresses, and so forth (Kgatlle 2019). The second characteristic is the one-on-one prophecy which happens during some consultations for which the congregants pay the man or woman of God (Mofokeng 2020). The third characteristic is the prophetic title: while church leaders are known by titles such as Pastor, Reverend, Bishop, and so forth, the prophets are known by titles such as major one, seer one, and so forth (Kgatlle & Anderson 2020). The fourth characteristic is prophetic deliverance which is different from the traditional deliverance from generational curses and other forms of bondage in the spirit realm (Banda 2020). The New Prophetic Churches in South Africa are churches such as the Enlightened Christian Gathering of Shepherd Bushiri who used to operate in

Pretoria, but has since relocated back home to Malawi as a fugitive running away from facing criminal charges in South Africa. Another one is the Rabboni Ministries International which operates from the North of Pretoria, Soshanguve and has several branches and sons in other parts of South Africa. A further prominent New Prophetic Church is the one by pastor Motsoeneng who operates in the east of Johannesburg. In addition, there is also the Alleluia Ministries International of pastor Alph Lukau of who used to operate in Randburg, but has also relocated overseas, and in the last instance there is the church of pastor Timothy Omotoso, the Jesus Dominion International, based in Durban, South Africa (see Kgatle 2021).

The New Prophetic Churches continue to grow regardless of the challenges the stream has faced in recent years and regardless of many of these prophets being in prison and some of them being relocated from South Africa. The retreat of prophets such as Shepherd Bushiri resulted in the rise of other prophets like Passion Java (born on 29 October 1987 as Panganai Java), a Zimbabwean Christian preacher and a son of Urbert Angela who is also known for prophecy and revelations. Another prophet who has emerged is Apostle Mohlala of Shekinah Ministry in Cape Town who also prophecies and performs various miracles. In addition, there are other prophets and prophetic churches planted in many cities and villages in South Africa that this study cannot quantify. These churches continue to be established in different cities because there are no vetting processes, and no theological education or ordination is required for pastors to enter the ministry. This means that anyone can start a New Prophetic Church regardless of their age or qualification or even other qualities such as good human behaviour. Consequently, it becomes easy for the prophets to establish churches like these anywhere for as long as there is a Public Address system and a tent, and the prophet should know how to communicate or preach well in English. Another reason for their proliferation is the fact that many South Africans like prophecies and miracles which they used to receive in African traditional religions and African independent churches such as Zion Christian Church, Nazarene Revival Church and so forth. Lastly, many of these South Africans are vulnerable, because they face real challenges such as unemployment and inequalities. Many of the prophets in these churches claim to have powers to solve problems not only of unemployment and poverty, but also problems of destitute, sickness, et cetera. Given these claims, most South Africans flock to these churches; hence, their proliferation in many cities in the country. It is also for the same reasons that there has been a movement from other churches into these New Prophetic Churches.

These churches were involved in different kinds of wrongdoings, particularly the abuse of religion and of people's beliefs. The New Prophetic Churches have been involved in what can be categorised as dangerous faith acts. Pastors such as Daniel Lesego of Rabboni Ministries fed his congregants grass and made others drink petrol in the name

of healing them (Resane 2017). Penuel Mnguni, the son of Lesego made his congregants eat snakes and said that the snakes turned to chocolate, because he had asked it in prayer. Another son of Lesego, Thabang Rabalago sprayed insecticide on some of the congregants for them to receive healing. Other than these dangerous faith acts, there are some activities of the New Prophetic Churches that might be categorised as criminal acts such as the alleged money laundering by Prophet Shepherd Bushiri and the alleged rape cases against Timothy Omotoso. Lastly, some abuses are neither dangerous faith acts nor criminal acts and can be categorised as fake miracles such as the resurrection miracle by Alph Lukau and many other miracles by Shepherd Bushiri. Shepherd Bushiri published a video on his various online platforms in which he was seen to be walking on air. However, he was tied with ropes that prevented him from falling. Another video showed Bushiri claiming that angels appeared in the building where he was ministering during an enlightened Christian gathering service, but those were some shadows projected onto the screens by his graphic designers. Other organised fake miracles include the claims that people were healed during the enlightened Christian gathering services, but these are people who were never sick in the first place (Kgatle 2021). The last category can be conceptualised as the commercialisation of religion in which many of these prophets were involved in robbing their congregants by means of one-on-one consultations charging huge amounts of money such as R7000.00 per consultation. In the next section, the article explores how the CRL commission reacted to these different forms of abuse.

The Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities commission and the abuses of religion

In the wake of the numerous cases of abuse by the New Prophetic Churches that were publicised on media platforms such as social media, television, print media and others, the government intervened through the commission for CRL. The CRL commission is one of the Chapter 9 institutions in South Africa that is tasked with advising the government on matters relating to religion and cultural practices. The commission has a constitutional and juristic mandate in ensuring that religious bodies are not run in conflict with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Henrico 2019). The commission started the investigation concerning the rationale behind the abuse of religion, the abuse of people's beliefs, and the commercialisation of religion on 03 November 2015 to 23 March 2016 (Banda 2019). The investigation was done by approaching some of the pastors mentioned in the preceding section, but most of them did not cooperate with the commission (Dube, Nkoane & Hlalele 2017:343). In addition, the commission wanted to find out how these churches operate in terms of their finances or collections made by them, whether the money is deposited in a legitimate bank account, and if there is financial accountability in terms of the income and expenditure of the monies received by these churches.

Banda (2019) summarised the findings of the commission as contained in the 2017 report as follows:

There is evidence of the commercialisation of religion in South Africa. Religious institutions are not complying with the existing appropriate laws of the land. Some religious institutions are operating without good governance structures such as codes of conduct, church councils, and disciplinary committees. There is flouting of banking rules including the non-banking of offerings collected from the congregants in commercial banks. Some churches evade paying tax, as some churches are registered as non-profit organizations (NPOs) but have an annual turnover beyond the NPO limit and do not declare that to the South African Revenue Services. There is uncontrolled movement of cash in and out of the country without the approval of the South African Reserve Bank. Churches in South Africa have mushroomed because it is easier to establish churches in the country than in other African countries. There is illegal and unethical advertising of religious and traditional healing services. Properties bought with congregants' contributions have been registered in spiritual leaders' names. Religious institutions have been operated as a business. There is a lack of religious peer-review mechanisms in the religious sector, allowing spiritual leaders to do as they please. There is a misuse of visa application systems by religious leaders. (p. 5)

It was based on the findings, as mentioned, that the commission recommended the regulation of religion in South Africa.

The investigative processes and the findings of the commission do make a huge contribution to the challenges facing the church particularly the New Prophetic Churches. However, some criminal cases that appeared before the commission such as rape and issues of money laundering could have easily been escalated to the national prosecuting authority for possible prosecution. These matters were dragged before the commission and by the time the national prosecuting authority wanted to act, some of these pastors had already left the country. The case of illegal immigration is also the task of the Home Affairs Department rather than those of the commission. In other cases appeared before the commission, particularly dangerous faith acts and fake miracles, the knowledge of the church and the ecumenical bodies in South Africa were required to differentiate between real miracles and fake miracles. Matters of investigating the running of the church and its finances rather call for the expertise of the ecumenical bodies than the commission. Therefore, the ecumenical bodies in South Africa have a pivotal role to play in curbing the abuses that are happening in the New Prophetic Churches. In the next section, the article is going to highlight some of the national ecumenical bodies and their relationship with the New Prophetic Churches before explaining their roles in curbing abuses.

Ecumenical bodies in the context of New Prophetic Churches

The national ecumenical body is the South African Council of Churches which is important to the Pentecostal movement

for the accountability of churches such as the New Prophetic Churches. According to the constitution, the South African Council of Churches (2017) has the following mission:

The South African Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches and organisations that confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The council affirms that the church is the body of Christ and, therefore, is one based on the scriptures. Though in obscurity and marred by sinful division, this unity of all Christians is the gift of God and does not need to be created. (p.1)

The classical Pentecostal churches, such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, is the member of the South African Council of Churches. In addition, charismatic churches such as the Grace Bible Church and the Rhema Bible Church are also members of the council. When reflecting deeply on these churches, there has been accountability on their side and none of them have been involved in the controversies such as the ones by the New Prophetic Churches.

There are also Pentecostal ecumenical bodies in South Africa that seek to unite the Pentecostal movement. This is because it started as a unified movement that united people coming from different regions. In addition, the movement united people of different races, colours, ethnicity and age groups for the purpose of worshipping together and having a Pentecostal experience of the work of the Holy Spirit. There is also the Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic Churches Fellowship of Southern Africa, The Alliance of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in South Africa, and the International Fellowship of Charismatic Churches. These are the ecumenical bodies that mostly provide for the independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches in South Africa in which the churches are accountable to one another in different aspects, that is, the spiritual and the administrative aspects of the church. In addition, in these fellowships such as the International Fellowship of Charismatic Churches, there are experienced and mature charismatic leaders such as Ray McCauley who is overseeing the conduct of emerging young pastors in these churches. Thus, when challenges and abuses arise, they can be dealt with by ecumenical bodies without involving the government or the commission.

However, the New Prophetic Churches mentioned in the preceding sections are not members of any of the Pentecostal ecumenical bodies listed here, let alone the South African Council of Churches. The lack of affiliation to the ecumenical bodies is a recipe for the abuses that have been going on in these churches, because there is no accountability. Hence, most of the prophets in the New Prophetic Churches are doing everything on their own such as collecting monies from people and using them to maintain their lavish lifestyles. These churches have negatively perceived ecumenical bodies and have been criticising the bodies on different platforms because of the influence they have on social media (Göranzon 2010). However, the main reason behind this criticism is an

excuse not to account for their actions. For this to change, there is a need for the New Prophetic Churches to establish an ecumenical body of their own to assure accountability. This will also encourage them to be affiliated with the national body such as the South African Council of Churches. Failure to join such ecumenical bodies will remain a recipe for abuse and will prevent these churches from having a voice in the broader Pentecostal movement and consequently, the church in general.

The role of ecumenical bodies in curbing the abuses

According to the ecclesiastical freedom theory as discussed previously, the church is not like other organisations; it is a living organism concerned with the spiritual part of people's lives. The church has two important aspects which are both important to its success: the first is the administrative part; and the second is the spiritual part. Thus, the government of South Africa cannot treat the church like any other non-governmental organisation, as the church has a spiritual side to things. This means that, other than the administrative side, there are many other issues such as the doctrine that the government cannot understand unless explained by the church. Therefore, it is important to separate the church from governmental and political authority or influence to fulfil the spiritual calling or mission of the church. This allows the church not only to have autonomy, but also to be able to speak to political power with its prophetic voice. However, when the church is regulated by the government, it will not be able to speak truth to power. It is from this authority that the church in the form of ecumenical bodies will be able to deal with abuses as they happen in New Prophetic Churches. Hence, the CRL commission needs to return the power to the church in order to deal with the abuse of religion and of people's beliefs.

The ecclesiastical freedom theory means that the church, through ecumenical bodies, has an opportunity to govern itself, and the ability to self-regulate rather than to be regulated by external forces. The best way for the church is not regulation by the government, but self-regulation through ecumenical bodies. The role of government is, therefore, to assist churches to formalise the councils and to create for these councils an environment conducive to pastors and churches being accountable to one another. When the church is self-regulating, it will be able to manage its internal affairs. In this context, the ecumenical bodies will be able to manage the abuses of religion. Therefore, there will be no need to delegate the issues faced by the church to the commission when the church can deal with them. When the church is self-regulating, it could actually be able to deal with these issues themselves with the help of its ecumenical bodies even before they go public. This is the importance of self-regulation, as many of the abuses should not have been exposed on media platforms if the ecumenical bodies were actively involved in the accountability of the churches towards one another.

The problems of the church, such as the abuse of religion and of people's beliefs, may easily be solved by ecumenical bodies, especially when they relate to issues of doctrine and biblical ethics. While some pastors and their churches have rebelled when approached by the commission, they might have opened up when probed by one of their own, that is, the ecumenical bodies. Equally, the members and followers of these churches who have defended their pastors might feel free most of the time to tell the truth when probed by other pastors in the ecumenical bodies. In addition, the churches and not the government are better placed to know the practices and activities in churches that are inconsistent with the fundamental practices of the Christian tradition and the Bible. The time taken by the CRL commission to probe if certain issues are correct or not, could have been saved, as the ecumenical bodies would know immediately that, for example, eating grass and drinking petrol are inconsistent with the Christian tradition. This means that the disciplinary hearing processes of the ecumenical bodies and the outcomes are more likely to be efficient than the process of the CRL commission.

The ecumenical bodies are instrumental in helping the government to identify which churches are registered and which ones are not registered through administrative bodies. The ecumenical bodies are also instrumental in helping the government not to generalise when dealing with the abuses by pastors. Because they work directly with these churches and pastors in communities, the ecumenical bodies be able to pick up and identify suspicious practices early before they go public. These processes would take the CRL commission longer and with great expense while the information on different churches is at the fingertips of the ecumenical bodies. This means that if the government wants to be successful in dealing with the commercialisation of religion, and the abuse of religion and of people's beliefs, the best way is to engage the ecumenical bodies rather than to rely on the CRL commission. It is therefore highly recommended that the government should not regulate churches, but rather use the ecumenical bodies to self-regulate, because they can identify the challenges. This is also possible when the New Prophetic Churches have their own ecumenical bodies to assure accountability. See summary of the recommendations on the proliferation of churches, the abuses and the role of ecumenical bodies as opposed to the South African government.

Recommendations

Recommendations will be as follows:

- Churches in South Africa can be self-regulated rather than to rely on the government to regulate them, because it is churches who are aware of different practices in their ranks.
- Churches in their denominations should be able to set minimum requirements for entering ministry or for starting a church which include the theological background of the pastor, registration and place of fellowship.

- The New Prophetic Churches should be allowed to organise themselves into ecumenical bodies to be accountable to one another.
- In these ecumenical bodies, the pastors should be able to have processes for disciplining those who are involved in the malpractice of religion contrary to Christian doctrinal values.
- The ecumenical bodies are well positioned to deal with abuses that are doctrinal through a reflection on the basic Christian doctrinal teachings.
- The government should be able to isolate criminal abuses and place the perpetrators through the justice system.
- Some of the incidents should be submitted to the Human Rights Commission, as they are a violation of human rights in South Africa.

Conclusion

This research is within the context of the ecumenical bodies in South Africa and explored the role these bodies have in the smooth running of churches, as opposed to the role played by the government. In other words, churches can be self-regulated and deal with abuses as they rise in their ranks rather than rely on the regulation of the government. Therefore, the New Prophetic Churches should be allowed to organise themselves into ecumenical bodies that will be able to address issues of accountability in these churches. In forming their ecumenical bodies, they will be able to join national bodies such as the South African Council of Churches. As members of these bodies, the pastors in New Prophetic Churches will have some sense of accountability towards other churches and their members. The role of the government is therefore to isolate incidents of criminal abuses and put the perpetrators through the justice system. Doctrinal matters can thus easily be dealt with by the church and its ecumenical bodies. Failure to recognise ecumenical bodies and regulate religion from a governmental perspective might result in the further rebellion of these pastors towards the government and its commission.

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Author's contributions

M.S.K. is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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