New Prophetic Churches and Syncretism: A Critical View

Mangaliso Matshobane

Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, University of South Africa, Pretoria 0003, South Africa; matshmm@unisa.ac.za

Abstract: New Prophetic Churches (NPCs) are a recent phenomenon within Pentecostalism in South Africa that have gained popularity. Their popularity is arguably due to their syncretism with African Traditional Religion (ATR), especially in its ministry practice of prophecy. The main objective of this article is to restore the sanctity of the prophetic ministry from a syncretic practice in NPCs back to its biblical foundation, by firstly highlighting the syncretic nature of NPCs prophetic ministry with divination, commonly practiced by native doctors in ATR. This study is a literary analysis of the practices of NPC prophets and their syncretic nature, using two case studies of NPC prophets. Osmer’s theoretical framework is used to describe syncretic practices of NPCs and the rationale behind such practices, then a normative reflection of the traditional practice is presented and pragmatic ways to realign NPCs into mainstream Pentecostalism are proposed. The findings reveal that most NPC prophets are faith healers operating in familiar spirits, not the Holy Spirit. The bible rejects divination; therefore, NPCs must determine what identity they choose between ATR and Christianity, because they cannot simultaneously operate in both.

Keywords: New Prophetic Churches (NPCs); African Traditional Religion (ATR); Prophecy; Syncretism; African Pentecostalism

1. Introduction

The popularity of the New Prophetic churches emerged at the turn of the millennium, due to the escalating number of unemployed people in South Africa and the rise in living costs. The prophets seem to be giving hope to these gullible, desperate audiences of southern Africa who are looking for a quick solution out of their poverty (Resane 2020, p. 100; Dube 2020, p. 42).

The prophetic element of New Prophetic Churches (NPCs) is arguably a practice introduced by Uebert Angel (native name Hubert Mudzanire) of Zimbabwe, who also mentored Shepherd Bushiri, a famous Malawian native who has become a specialist in prophecy such that his followers called him Major1, to distinguish him from the rest (Kgatle 2020c). This prophetic element is so because NPCs specialise in personal prophecy, where specific private details of individuals prophesied over are made public by the prophet, presumably without being told by the recipient or any other person. The main characteristic of these churches, among others, is personal prophecies, which are meant to expose the covert demonic operations in the lives of individuals and the cause of their misfortunes. This type of personal prophecy is known as ‘ukuchazwa’ (‘fortune telling’) in the South African cultural context, and is used mainly by sangomas (native doctors) to foretell the future of individuals. This personal prophecy is what Kgatle calls forensic prophecy, where the prophet reveals the phone numbers, car registration numbers, birth dates, and the specific meal that a person ate the previous day to demonstrate the superior spiritual capabilities of the prophet (Kgatle 2019, p. 3).

The ability of the NPCs to address the felt needs through prophecy makes them a popular choice for many who need answers for their troubled circumstances. Their ability to use social and electronic media in marketing their prophetic videos has made them famous and attracted many people to their churches. Their grandiose lifestyles make them...
fit the profile of ‘gurus’ or some special ‘demigods’, which makes people conclude that their lifestyle is by reason of their prophetic abilities. This phenomenon of honour and great awe is evident among African traditional healers (izangoma), also known as native doctors, who are held in high esteem by their communities due to their ability to prophesy or diagnose their clients when coming for consultation. There are similarities between how the NPC prophets and the native healers operate, which will be the critical argument of this article on the role of syncretism among NPCs.

The main objective of this article is to restore the sanctity of the prophetic ministry from a syncretic practice in NPCs back to its biblical foundation by firstly highlighting the syncretic nature of NPCs’ prophetic ministry with divination, commonly practised by native doctors in ATR. This study will be a literary analysis of the practices of NPC prophets and their syncretic nature. This article uses the theoretical framework of Osmer (2008) to ascertain what this prophetic ministry is and why it operates the way it does. What should be the proper boundaries or parameters within the biblical framework when it comes to serving or operating the gifts of the spirit? This article confronts divination from a biblical perspective (Deuteronomy 18:9–14 https://bible.com/bible/114/deu.18.9-14, accessed on 19 August 2023), and proposes the servant attitude of Luke 17:10 (https://bible.com/bible/114/luk.17.10, accessed on 19 August 2023) Philippians 2:3–8 (https://bible.com/bible/114/php.2.3-8, accessed on 19 August 2023) and 1 Corinthians 14:3 (https://bible.com/bible/114/1co.14.3, accessed on 19 August 2023) as a biblical practice in prophetic ministry that NPC prophets ought to consider if they are to operate within the biblical framework.

2. African Perspective and NPCs

Africans are generally spiritual because of their foundation of primal religion, which views everything that happens around their lives from a spiritual perspective of cause and effect, always wanting to know what the reason is for things to be the way they are, especially if they are negative (Nel 2019; Omenyo 2011). Neo-prophetic pastors aware of Africans’ natural spiritual inclination have closed the gap that the missionary churches could not fill among Africans. According to the South African cultural atlas, the Christian population stands at almost 84.2% (Scroope 2019), meaning that most people are somewhat conversant with the message of the gospel about Jesus Christ the saviour, healer, baptiser in the spirit and soon coming king, which are the tenets of the Christian faith in the Pentecostal tradition where NPCs originate (Dayton 1980).

NPCs originate from Charismatic Pentecostals and strongly emphasise the gift of the spirit, including prophecy. They allow the prophetic ministry to freely operate in their congregations through a company of prophets, or those with a prophetic gift who may or may not be the leading pastor of the church. This free operation of gifts in the congregation is also known as the priesthood of all believers, where the gifts are active in the whole church, including the gift of prophecy, also practised in African Initiated Churches (AIC) like the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), where the prophetic ministry can operate upon those who are gifted and not just the pastor or leader of the church (Ramantswana 2018). One of the foundations of Charismatic Pentecostals that provided a launching pad for NPCs is the emphasis on the pioneering, charismatic, iconic leader gifted in healing and deliverance, with a strong emphasis on the message of prosperity (Frahm-Arp 2016). These three elements, the prophetic ministry, the message of prosperity and the gift of healing through deliverance, were taken to the extreme by NPCs who paraded the giftedness of one leader and turned that leader into a celebrity prophet, resulting in a celebrity cult (Kgatle 2021, pp. 135–56). Among such leaders, the following have become the flagship of NPCs because of their popularity in the public domain through social and electronic media coverage: Shepherd Bushiri of the Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG) and Paseka Motsoeneng of Incredible Happenings. These NPC leaders and many others like them are self-proclaimed prophets who have no oversight institution to which they are accountable; as a result, all the persons mentioned above are involved in some controversial stories
that have attracted the media (Kgatle 2020a; Matshobane and Masango 2020). Firstly, it is essential to define syncretism and how it is used in this article.

3. Syncretism Defined

Syncretism comes from the Greek word ‘synkretismos’, and it originates from the tradition of the Island of Crete, where various quarreling groups, who under normal circumstances do not agree, joined forces together against a common enemy (Ezenweke and Kanu 2012; Gehman 2001). In the same manner as the example above, syncretism is defined as a combination of two contrasting ideas, finding synergy in pursuit of a common goal that ultimately blends the two to such an extent that something new emerges that originates from both, yet is different from them (Schreiter 1994; Gehman 2001).

In its simplistic definition, syncretism is the replacement of fundamental tenets of the gospel with the religious elements of the host culture (Ezenweke and Kanu 2012). Syncretism can be either critical or uncritical. Uncritical syncretism is the infusion of other beliefs into the Christian faith without any filtering, which affects the sanctity of the Christian faith (Chidili 1997). A biblical example of uncritical syncretism in the scripture is in 1 Samuel 28:7–9 (https://bible.com/bible/114/1sa.28.7-9, accessed on 19 August 2023) where Saul, the first king of Israel, requires a woman who was a wizard to bring up the spirit of Samuel from the dead. This act of communicating with the dead was a forbidden practice in Israel (Deuteronomy 18:10 https://bible.com/bible/114/deu.18.10, accessed on 19 August 2023); as a result, the very King Saul had ordered that such divination practices and those who practise them should be driven out of the land (1 Samuel 28:3 https://bible.com/bible/114/1sa.28.3, accessed on 19 August 2023). We see, however, king Saul operating in a syncretic manner by consulting a wizard who was a pagan practitioner. The pattern of uncritical syncretism is abundant in the scriptures concerning Israel and their worship of God. Israel was many times rebuked by the prophets for idolatry that was caused by uncritical syncretism with pagan religions (Ezekiel 16:28 https://bible.com/bible/114/ezk.16.28, accessed on 19 August 2023), Jeremiah 44:17 https://bible.com/bible/114/jer.44.17 accessed on 19 August 2023, Exodus 34:15–16 https://bible.com/bible/114/exo.34.15.16 accessed on 19 August 2023).

Uncritical syncretism results in enculturation, where a new culture is intentionally learned and practised to relate to those who practise it (Grusec and Hastings 2014). In some cases, uncritical syncretism can manifest through acculturation, a balancing act in the practices of two cultures, where the dominant culture prevails over the other. However, the minor is still practised (Grusec and Hastings 2014).

On the other hand, critical syncretism is the analysis of a prevailing culture and adopting elements that are accommodative of the gospel while discarding those that are not, and repackaging the gospel with nuances of the host culture (Ezenweke and Kanu 2012). This repackaging of the gospel is also known as inculturation or contextualisation in missiology (Bosch 2011). There are also biblical texts that provide an example of critical syncretism. One such text is in Acts 15, where the church council in Jerusalem had to decide whether the gentile Christians had to be circumcised for them to be accepted as faithful followers of Christ.

The decision made by the council of Jerusalem (in Acts 15) demonstrated a critical syncretism because they did not just expect the Gentiles to assimilate Christianity packaged into the Jewish culture of circumcision. Instead, they contextualised the gospel message to accommodate the Gentiles’ non-circumcision culture. Critical syncretism is a strategic vehicle for the global spread of the gospel into various cultures, nations, and tribes; without it, it would have been impossible for the gospel to spread into all the nations of the world. A scriptural reference that confirms the latter is the mission of Paul, the apostle, in Athens, where the Greeks were worshipping so many gods that they had an inscription “to the unknown God” (Acts 17:23 https://bible.com/bible/114/act.17.23, accessed on 19 August 2023), just in case there is a god they missed in representing their worship.
Paul’s understanding of the Athenian context enabled him to use critical syncretism by claiming that the God he presented was the same God the Athenians had already mentioned in one of their altars.

Therefore, there is no pure religion or practice of faith whose context has yet to be somehow influenced because every context has been shaped by a particular culture, which itself is syncretic (Frankfurter 2021). Based on this definition, therefore, the argument is not about syncretism in general, but about uncritical syncretism, which is demonstrated through practices of acculturation and, ultimately, enculturation, which compromises the fundamental belief of the Christian faith. This article argues that the practice of prophetic ministry in NPCs is uncritically syncretic and influenced by the practice of traditional healers in African Traditional Religion (ATR).

It is important at this stage to define what constitutes traditional healers, which are categorised into three or more categories: diviners, herbalists and faith healers. Troskie (1997), in empirical research, defines the concept of traditional healers and their categories as follows. Diviners are native doctors because of their ability to diagnose their clients by connecting with ancestral spirits, and receive direction or a prognosis from them using animal bones and other traditional artifacts for diagnoses. Herbalists are medicine people who know how to cure specific illnesses using specific herbs revealed through dreams, including those that can protect from witchcraft. However, they are not necessarily diviners, although they can easily become such because of their ability to connect with the spirit world. Faith healers are inclined towards the Christian faith, and therefore use the bible, prayer and the lighting of candles as their tools for diagnosis. They can also become diviners simultaneously, where the ancestral spirit can guide them (Truter 2007; Sodi et al. 2011; cf. Mayo 2022, p. 458; Mbiti 2015, p. 155). It is the latter statement that demonstrates the uncritical syncretic nature of NPCs. At this stage, the theoretical framework of Osmer will enable the study to unpack the complexity of syncretism in NPCs further.

4. Theoretical Framework

Osmer (2008) shares a story from his first congregation where he faced a conflict among members over the right location to place a swing set for children to play while the parents converse over coffee. The swing set was placed next to a covered picnic area where a barbecue for homecoming friends and family was held once a year. The covered picnic area was built by a bookkeeper of the church in honour of her deceased husband; as a result, she took offense when the new members of the church who had young children decided to place the swing set next to the ‘sacred’ area without asking for her permission. This information was not known to the newer and younger church members, including Osmer, as a new pastor of the church. When she quit her service as a longstanding bookkeeper and church member over a swing set, Osmer was bewildered and suspected something profound to the action. In his quest to find a solution, he developed the four core tasks of practical theological interpretation, which are descriptive–empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic tasks to understand “What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?” (Osmer 2008, loc 90).

Osmer’s (2008) theoretical framework of theological interpretation guides this article to describe uncritical syncretism in NPCs empirically and attempt to interpret it using various theories and then, to propose a normative way of good practice in theology and a pragmatic solution to resolve the problem.

The following case studies will help to highlight some of the uncritical syncretic practices of NPCs by “gathering information that helps us to discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations or contexts.” (Osmer 2008, loc 90).

We start with prophet Shepherd Bushiri, a native of Malawi, born 20 February 1983. He founded a church called Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG), based in Pretoria, South Africa, as its headquarters. It has church branches in Malawi, Tanzania, Ghana and South Sudan (Walubengo 2022). The church started in 2010 in Malawi, but was formally registered in South Africa in 2012 (Mokoena 2020). He became a Christian early in his youth. Although
his family was impoverished, he attained a higher education from the Therapon University of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. Various controversial practices concerning Bushiri’s ministry are accessible in the public domain. However, this article focuses on his prophecy to Ms. Miya, one of the attendants of ECG who also happened to be an employee in one of Bushiri’s businesses. Shepherd Bushiri made claims in the presence of a congregation of thousands of attendees, recorded on their television station, that Ms. Mpane, the wife of Ms. Miya’s ex-husband, had bewitched them both to break them up (Mothombeni 2018; cf. Kgatle 2020b). Ms. Mpane challenged this so-called prophecy through the legal route, where she sued Bushiri R1000,000 and ZAR 500,000 respectively, for character defamation, which she claims harmed her business and affected her husband, who had to resign from work because of the damage the prophecy caused to his image and reputation at his workplace (Mothombeni 2018). This diagnosis of witchcraft is popular among traditional healers, and also causes enmity among family members in most cases. The following empirical research by Shange and Ross (2022) confirms this common diagnosis.

In the empirical research by Shange and Ross (2022), fourteen (14) traditional healers categorised as diviners, herbalists and faith healers were interviewed on their diagnostic methods when treating mental illness (Shange and Ross 2022). This qualitative research design was among male and female traditional healers aged 18 years and older who had been practising for over five years, particularly on mental health cases. The main criteria were the experience in the practice based on indigenous education more than Western education. A purposive snowball sampling was used to recruit the participants in the township of Dube in Soweto, Johannesburg. Five persons were between 18 and 29 years, another five were between 30 and 40 years, three were between 41 and 50 and one was between 51 and 65. Ten were males, eight were herbalists, five were diviners and one was a faith healer. The data collection method was interviews based on closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions were to collect the biographical details of the traditional healers, while the open questions were to elicit their views on how they understood mental illness. The research revealed that in the category of the causes of mental illness, among others, witchcraft was the first suspected cause that inflicted the illness. This witchcraft spell is because of jealousy, mainly from those close to the victim, like extended family members, friends, neighbours or work colleagues (Shange and Ross 2022, p. 509; Ramantswana and Sebetseli 2021). This diagnosis of witchcraft as a cause of misfortune is a common diagnosis when the causes of illness, misfortune or any other inexplicable phenomenon are unknown (Sodi et al. 2011, p. 103; cf. Mbiti 2015, pp. 157–65; Ômenyo 2011). When comparing Bushiri’s prophecy on the activities of witchcraft that are a cause of breaking a marriage and the empirical research findings from traditional healers who also suspect witchcraft as a cause of mental illness, the common diagnosis for both is witchcraft. This common diagnosis causes enmity among friends, neighbours, family and colleagues, as the case is with Bushiri’s prophecy. Therefore, a clear uncritical syncretism exists between how NPC prophets conduct their prophetic diagnoses and how traditional healers make their diagnoses (cf. Cook 2009). This similarity in diagnosis connects NPCs and traditional healers in an uncritical syncretic relationship.

Another uncritical syncretism happens in how deliverance is administered among those who have come to seek help or a way of treatment to cure their sickness or whatever problem they present. Deliverance in its simplest form in the scriptures is understood as the casting out of demons, just as Jesus did it in his ministry (Luke 11:19 https://bible.com/bible/114/luk.11.19, accessed on 19 August 2023; Luke 13:32 https://bible.com/bible/114/luk.13.32, accessed on 19 August 2023; Mark 3:15 https://bible.com/bible/114/mrk.3.15, accessed on 19 August 2023). Deliverance, however, in African Pentecostalism, particularly charismatic Pentecostals and also NPCs, goes beyond casting out demons to breaking ties with generational curses, confronting witchcraft, praying for physical and emotional healing, which is presumably caused by demonic spirits, all in the name of spiritual warfare (Kgatle 2022; cf. Chitando 2009, p. 38; Asamoah-Gyadu 2015, p. 24; see also Adogame 2012, p. 76).
An excellent example of uncritical syncretism in deliverance is demonstrated by Paseka Motsoeneng, a prophet of Incredible Happenings, an NPC church, who is also famous for his rather unconventional ways of conducting deliverance. Paseka Franz Motsoeneng, also known as 'Pastor Mboro' (a shortened slang name of 'prophet' in vernacular called moporofeta or mprofeti), is a South African citizen, born on 8 April 1968, a founder of Incredible Happenings Ministries (IHM) based in Katlehong. He is a televangelist and prophet. “Nothing much is known about his . . . educational background” (Smith 2022). He started his healing ministry in the late 1980s, praying for sanitary pads to cure sexual problems for both males and females (Ndlangisa 2017). In the early 1990s, after being inspired by the preaching of the father of Charismatic Pentecostalism in South Africa, Pastor Ray McCauley of Rhema Bible Church, he launched his congregation and named it Living Hope Family Church; he later renamed it City of Hope Church, only to finally change it into the current name of IHM (Ndlangisa 2017). His mother was a faith healer at St. John’s Apostolic Faith mission, an African Indigenous church (AIC) with an affinity to African Traditional Religion, which the young Motsoeneng was exposed to in his youth (Ndlangisa 2017). He had a syncretic foundation of African Traditional Religion and Charismatic Pentecostalism in his religious formation. Among many other controversial stories in the public domain surrounding the ministry practices of Paseka Motsoeneng, two incidences are of interest to this study. In the first one, Motsoeneng conducted deliverance on a 17-year-old girl by putting his fingers in her genitals in the presence of a live audience and television crew, all this in the name of deliverance, which was a typical way he used to deliver females from certain demonic afflictions (Naik 2011). Another reported incidence is when one male congregant had an erectile dysfunction. He and his wife called Motsoeneng to their house to pray for them in the presence of a TV crew. He instructed them to lay hands on their private parts while he prayed for them. After the prayer, the men’s problem was cured, and they immediately slept together, exercising their conjugal rights in a live recording. However, the TV station manager censored the material from being broadcast, which Motsoeneng contested but did not win (Malatji 2017).

Traditional healers also use unconventional methods to cure their clients of evil spirits. The cleansing ritual of bathing those who need cleansing from some alleged evil spirits is a common practice among traditional healers. Men and women come naked into the water basin with indigenous medicine (muthi) to cleanse them from all evil spirits as a form of deliverance (Shange and Ross 2022, pp. 512, 517; Sodi et al. 2011). The problem of infertility and erectile dysfunction has always been a matter that traditional healers have been known to cure through traditional medicines (Semenya and Potgieter 2014, pp. 7, 8). Therefore, we see a similarity again in deliverance between traditional healers and how NPC prophets operate. Both have the potential to bring shame to those who are being delivered due to the unconventional methods of deliverance or treatment. The difference in all these cases above is that the traditional healers are doing all of their work in the privacy of their working space. However, NPC prophets conduct their business in the congregation’s presence, and with Live broadcasts posted on social media for the world to see, bringing further shame to their participants.

One more thing that connects the syncretic nature of NPC prophets with traditional healers is the similarity of style in their presentation. It is common knowledge that diviners seek an affirmative response from their clients, to agree with them while they are giving them their diagnosis by constantly requiring all who are in attendance to affirm when he/she says “Vumani Bo!” (translated: “Say Yes!”); their reply is “Siyavuma!” (translated: “We say Yes!”) (Velllem 2010; cf. Maithufi 2016). This same pattern of requiring affirmation is used by NPC prophets and demonstrated by the recipients of the prophecy, where after every statement that the NPC prophet makes in his diagnosis, he requires a response by asking “Is this true?”; then, the respondents reply “Yes prophet it is true!”, as witnessed in their social media channels. This line of asking is conducted repeatedly after every statement made by the prophet, theatrically and emotionally, while the prophet continues to prophesy. Then, the prophet turns to the crowd who are witnesses of the prophecy to
ask them, Can I prophesy? Can I go deeper? Then, they reply, Prophesy! Go deeper, papa (our father)! (Kgatle 2022). This line of questioning is another case of similar operations in deliverance between faith healers and NPC prophets.

Furthermore, Ramabulana (2018) exposes the training that some of these prophets receive by sharing his testimony on how he was trained as a faith healer to produce miracles and prophecies, and to grow his church membership. Some training administered to the NPC prophets reveals some cultic practices that Kgatle discusses in detail (Kgatle 2021). Similarly, traditional healers undergo training from 6 months up to a year, and even years of rigorous training with various rituals and spiritual experiences, including encounters with snakes in the water (Sodi et al. 2011; Troskie 1997). The training of both has similar unconventional encounters.

There are also consultation fees for one-on-one sessions with the prophet for further diagnoses; this consultation comes at a cost that is paid upfront, which can be anything from ZAR 5000 and above (Mashaba 2015; cf. Tsekpoe 2019). It is also standard practice for traditional healers to charge a consultation fee that varies from ZAR 2000 to above, depending on the case presented (Troskie 1997, p. 34). The similarity of the two patterns shows how the uncritical syncretic NPC has imbibed the style of native doctors. The question is, what causes the NPC prophets to be uncritically syncretic? The answer to this question is the next focus of this paper.

5. Interpretation of the Syncretic Behaviour

The interpretive task draws on multidisciplinary theories “to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring” (Osmer 2008, loc 92). This article draws on the African perspective, also found in primal religions, where the spiritual realm is as natural as the material realm; as a result, the African perspective is preoccupied with the causes of misfortunes and who is behind them (Nel 2019, p. 3). In general, there is always a belief among Africans that behind every misfortune there is a mastermind who is using sorcery (Mbiti 2015, p. 166). Therefore, the AmaXhosa tribe in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa have a saying, “Ayihambi yodwa”, meaning that something (evil) is behind what can be seen with the naked eye. NPC prophets, therefore, appeal to a greater audience of Africans because they claim to reveal who is behind the misfortunes, calling it a forensic prophecy, as indicated above, typically what traditional healers and diviners can also reveal (Kgatle 2019). It is these kinds of similarities and the ones mentioned above that make most people unable to differentiate between the NPCs and traditional healers, which indicates that NPCs have now become fully syncretical with traditional healers (Kgatle 2019, p. 2; cf. Nel 2019, pp. 3, 4; Mwandayi 2014, p. 238; Shoko and Chiwara 2013).

There is consensus among scholars in African Pentecostalism that the new phenomenon of NPC is uncritically syncretic with traditional healers in ATR. The position of this study aligns with the conclusion by scholars of African Pentecostalism, who perceive the prophetic praxis of NPCs as uncritically syncretic with ATR, with a slight variation that they are more aligned to faith healers (abathandazeli, if singular—umthadazeli or umprofethi) than to traditional healers. Faith healers are classified as a part of ATR, with similar operations as traditional healers. However, the difference is that they use the bible, lit candles and prayer as their tools for operation instead of bones and other traditional items, as with diviners (Sodi et al. 2011). Therefore, faith healers are a branch of ATR that has acculturated into Christianity. Taringa (2013) further develops this argument, stating that these NPC prophets operate similarly to traditional healers, and concludes that they are traditional healers who have disguised themselves as preachers of the gospel by wearing suits instead of traditional regalia.

Chimuka (2016), however, argues differently about NPC prophets; the conclusion reached by Taringa, including Shoko and Chiwara, who have a similar argument, is inconclusive if it is only based on similarities of operational methodology. He points out that if the above argument is valid, that NPC prophets are disguised as traditional healers,
what could be wrong when NPCs align themselves with African spirituality? What makes African spirituality to be perceived as satanic and void of the Holy Spirit? (Chimuka 2016).

In essence, what Chimukwa is asking is if there is anything wrong in being a Christian who operates in divination regardless of whether the practitioner is African, Western or Asian? All nations have an element of divination in their traditions; for an example, palmistry, fortune tellers, horoscopes and psychics arguably use some form of divination in the Western culture (Rhodes 2006). The answer to Chimukwa’s question brings us to the third step in our theoretical framework, which is a normative position on how things ought to be concerning the syncretic nature of NPCs.

6. Normative Position on Syncretism

   The normative task uses “theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our response and learning from good practice” (Osmer 2008, loc 92). In this article, biblical theology, expressed through scripture, serves as an ethical standard to guide our responses and follow good practice.

In Deuteronomy 18:9–14 https://bible.com/bible/114/deu.18.9-14 (accessed on 19 August 2023) the scripture states the following:

   “When you enter the land the Lord is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or their daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so.”

The scriptures forbade any involvement with divination, mediums, sorcery or spiritists, which tend to defile the people (Leviticus 19:31 https://bible.com/bible/114/lev.19.31, accessed on 19 August 2023). Furthermore, in the New Testament (Acts 16:16 https://bible.com/bible/114/act.16.16, accessed on 19 August 2023), Paul the Apostle cast out a spirit of divination out of a girl who made money for her employees, and she no longer was able to operate in that spirit. This act of Paul indicates that the spirit of divination was not only forbidden for the people of God to be involved with, but it is evident that divination does not originate from God’s Holy Spirit, but it is a familiar spirit that had to be cast out. Normatively, there must be a distinction between the Holy Spirit and familiar spirits, and these two cannot co-exist in mutual agreement; hence, Paul had to cast out the spirit of divination.

Inculturation in contextualisation will always be needed in advancing the gospel’s message to different parts of the world, its cultures, and contexts. Contextualisation “is an effort to express the never changing word of God in ever changing modes of relevance” (Kato 1975). Furthermore, the incarnation was contextual, where God had to come from heaven and take the form of humans to reach them in their context without compromising his message and mandate (Bergmann and Vähäkangas 2021, p. 5). The language of presenting the gospel, including theological concepts, must be expressed in forms that will be relevant to the context of the recipients, without compromising the original meaning of the concepts. However, there is a thin line between inculturation (critical syncretism) and acculturation (uncritical syncretism), and caution must always be exercised in watching that those lines are not crossed. On the question of prophecy, scripture (1 Corinthians 14:3 https://bible.com/bible/114/1co.14.3, accessed on 19 August 2023) is clear that prophecy is meant to encourage, to edify and to comfort (cf. Kgatle 2020b). It is not meant to shame, ridicule or embarrass, as with the prophecies given by some NPC prophets. On charging consultation fees, scripture (Matthew10:8 https://bible.com/bible/114/mat.10.8, accessed on 19 August 2023) instructs those in the mission field and ministering to God’s people
to do so without commercialising the gifts God has given them. On servanthood and one’s disposition in ministry, the scripture presents the example of Jesus, who is a servant (Philippians 2:3–8 https://bible.com/bible/114/php.2.3-8, accessed on 19 August 2023) and leader who intentionally humbles himself before God, even if he is part of the Godhead; also, how, after serving, the attitude must not be pomp and hype, but humility (Luke 17:10 https://bible.com/bible/114/luk.17.10, accessed on 19 August 2023).

7. Pragmatic Position on Syncretism

The pragmatic task determines “strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable…” (Osmer 2008, loc 95). The practical strategy of this study is to guide NPCs away from their current position of uncritical syncretism through acculturation to the ideal position of critical syncretism through inculturation and contextualisation.

New Prophetic Churches’ prophets must take a clear position in their religious affiliation, whether they follow Christianity or African Traditional Religion. However, they can never claim both positions, since they are diametrically different from each other based on the source of their authority—the Holy Spirit vs. familiar spirits. In its current form, NPCs are presented as Pentecostals and Charismatics, due to their style of worship and order of service; however, when the prophet starts operating, it takes discernment to recognise the shift from preacher to faith healer.

The congregants must be made aware when attending NPC church services that they are submitting themselves to the ministry of a faith healer who is operating under the influence of familiar spirits and not necessarily the Holy Spirit. Typically of some cults when they join the church, the actual nature of the ministry is not fully revealed, and all appears as normal as a Pentecostal and Charismatic Church (PCC); it is not until later, when one has already been deeply active in the church, that they discover they are involved in a cult.

8. Conclusions

In this article, syncretism was defined, and the conclusion was that no matter how we try to avoid it using terms like hybrid, mixture, inculturation or acculturation, it is still syncretism. There is a stigma around the term syncretism, but not all syncretism is negative; it depends on the type of syncretism implemented. Critical syncretism is a positive version because it contextualises the gospel message to communicate within the culture dynamics without losing the message’s essence. The incarnation of Christ was contextual; therefore, it is a positive kind of syncretism where Christ had to be born in the earthly environment and learn all the ways of humanity. He was surrounded by sin and sinners, but he did not sin, yet he could communicate to sinners within a paradigm that they could understand. On the other hand, uncritical syncretism is imbibing the culture of one’s surroundings, and allowing prescription to the culture about what ought to be done to a point where the culture takes over. This process is called acculturation, where a dominant culture overrules the minor cultural influence to a point where one can become enculturated entirely or absorbed into another. This enculturation is called an uncritical syncretism because it does not critique its encounters with its surroundings, but adopts whatever is presented as a different experience, hence affecting the essence of the original message. The latter has been the case with New Prophetic Churches, where their prophets have absorbed methods of African Traditional Religion and used them as bait to attract African Christians. These Christians seek solutions to life’s challenges and questions, and may not want to ask a traditional healer if they can obtain the same service in an air-conditioned building in a church-like atmosphere. We have established that the operations of NPC prophets fit the profile of faith healers who also use the Bible and prayer with lit candles to administer their calling. Based on the similarity of the results of their prophecies, some have proven to be divisive, especially among family and friends, since they focus on a witch hunt within the relational scope of the inquirer. Therefore, it stands to reason that the source of their operation is the same: the spirit of divination or a familiar spirit rather than the Holy Spirit.
The similarity of training that NPC prophets undergo is as rigorous as the training of traditional healers. This kind of training is not biblical, nor is it carried out in conventional ministry training institutions. However, it is cult-like based on the personal testimony of an x-NPC prophet who has undergone training and is now confessing these secrets after choosing to come out of this negative syncretism. Using Osmer’s theoretical framework, the study used two case studies of Bushiri and Motsoeneng, both NPC prophets, to empirically describe and then interpret why such a phenomenon was happening, state what should be a normative practice, and propose practical ways of handling this negative syncretism. The conclusion is that the bible is very explicit about its negative position concerning diviners, no matter the cultural affiliation; therefore, on that basis, NPCs must decide on which identity they want to have, African Traditional Religion or Christianity, because they cannot be both.

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