

# Transition from the Opium of Religion to Religion as Opioids: Abuse of Religious Teachings in the New Prophetic Churches in South Africa

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## Abstract

The New Prophetic Churches is a religion in the mix, demonstrated by their points of contact with classical Pentecostalism, the prosperity gospel, African independent churches, and African traditional religion. New Prophetic Churches have points of contact with classical Pentecostalism with reference to the doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. They are also influenced by the African traditional religions with reference to their connection with the spirit world. In addition, they have points of contact with the African independent churches concerning the use of healing and deliverance products. Furthermore, they have points of contact with the prosperity gospel in teaching the message of material blessing. The original form of these influences is presented in this article as opium religion, whereas the corrupted form of these influences is presented as opioid forms of religion. The latter refers to a somewhat dangerous mix of religious teachings, advocated by self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches. These spiritual leaders have concocted this mixture contrary to the original purpose of such teachings with the intention to satisfy their commercial desires to the detriment of the spiritual wellbeing of their followers and the sacredness of religious teachings, particularly Christian teachings. Relying on a literary analysis, this article challenges the religious teachings of opioid religions that undermine the original good intentions with which these teachings are mixed. It suggests that any religious teaching in the Christian tradition should be consistent with the eternal purpose of God's mission, identity in Christ, and the fundamental tenets of the Christian tradition. There are neo-

Pentecostal churches that are consistent with the mission of God, bringing solutions to various challenges in Africa. However, the focus here is on the New Prophetic Churches that have transited from the opium of religion to religion as opioids.

**Keywords:** Opium of religion, New Prophetic Churches, Pentecostalism, classical Pentecostalism, African independent churches, African traditional religions, opioids

## **Introduction**

For decades, considerable research has explored the concept of religion from which various definitions and understandings have emerged (cf. Boyer 2001; Guthrie 2007; Jensen 2014). Despite decades of intense research, a universal understanding of religion eludes consensus – hence the ongoing debate by various scholars from multiple academic fields. However, it is generally agreed that religion has some moral obligation, sense of right, and duty to service. In Africa in general and South Africa in particular, religious history has evolved so much over time that it is no longer clear which form of religion the locals practice. It has been noted by several scholars that Africa has become a hub of new religious movements, particularly prophetic movements (Jules-Rossette 1997). Similarly, scholars such as Kgatle (2020b, 2020c) and Kgatle and Anderson (2020) have highlighted that South Africa has equally witnessed the unprecedented emergence and proliferation of New Prophetic Churches in recent years (cf. Kgatle 2020b). These churches have become a very popular subject among religious and theological scholars because of the shocking, bizarre, and unprecedented practices, which constitute the misuse of religion, often conducted by or attributed to some of their leaders (Ramantswana & Sebetseli 2021).

Perhaps the German philosopher, Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) meant well when he declared that religion is the opium of the people. While some scholars strongly insist that his utterance was an attack on religion (Clarkson 1973:141), this article will deliberately take the position of those who believe that he meant well by likening the function of pure religion to the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the soul of the soulless conditions, and therefore the opium of the people (Omonijo,

Uche, Nnedum, & Chine 2016:1). In other words, this article agrees with views that suggest that Marx was merely trying to underscore the importance of religion as the only human entity that embodies a heart, soul, and comfort (opium) in the heartless and soulless world of oppression, exploitation, and misery imposed by capitalism. Contrary to this understanding, religious incidents in South Africa appear to contradict the analogy of opium itself. The mixture of religions in this country seems to compare comfortably with the misuse of opioids as the dangerous or corrupted form of opium. For this reason, this contribution follows Marx's trail of the opium image in a religious context, but deliberately expands the discussion to toxic opioids to analogously show the dangerous use of religious beliefs and practices in Africa and South Africa, particularly by some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches.

This study consists of two sections: First, an understanding of opium and opioids is introduced, while the correct form of religion is equated to an opium form of religion, whereas the corrupted form of religion is equated to opioids, particularly with reference to the problematic conduct of some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches; and second, the mix of religious teachings prevalent in the profile of the new Pentecostal churches is analyzed. Influences or points of contact that constitute a form of opioid religion, are highlighted. Some important recommendations are made. This study then culminates in a rather important conclusion, namely that the admixture of religious teachings, given their original intentions, can be dangerous or harmful to religious teachings, especially when such teachings are expressed by people with selfish desires, being evidenced by the irresponsible behavior of some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches in Africa and particularly in South Africa.

## **Defining Opium and Opioids**

In this section, the original or ancient use of opium, its abuse, and how Marx used it to describe religion, are briefly highlighted. Although the introduction of these two usages seems to lengthen the discussion and somehow adds no value, such an introduction is warranted by the fact that this very class of drugs is used metaphorically in this article to help clarify the composition of some churches within Christianity, especially those of Pentecostal origin.

Additionally, introducing the original and common uses of these drugs will help to clarify why they are favored as qualifying or relevant metaphors to describe religious compositions.

## **Opium**

Opium cultivation dates to the late Neolithic age (4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE) and has been known for its pain-relieving properties for centuries (Hemmings & Lambert 2019:705). The early use of this substance included the sedation of crying children, euthanasia, anesthesia, and pain treatment in general. Eating and smoking opium became popular in the 1800s in Europe and the USA. Gradually, each new use of opium gave way to abuse, addiction, and other dangerous illicit opioids. This background is used to metaphorically equate or compare the dangerous illegal opioids with the toxic mixture of religions in South Africa.

Opium is a dried fluid obtained from a plant called the opium poppy. Masoudkabar, Sarrafzadegan, and Eisenberg (2013:733) narrate: ‘Opium (*Lachryma Papaveris Teriak*) is a brown, sticky or crumbly substance formed from an air-dried, milky latex fluid obtained from incising the unripe capsules (poppy) of *papaver somniferum*’. Hoffmann (1990:54) introduces the view that in Sumerian Mesopotamia, opium was formerly known as a ‘Hul Gil’ (the plant of joy) and was used as a medicine. Furthermore, scholars agree that there was a time when opium was used for religious purposes. Brownstein (1993:5391) points out that initially, priests knew opium, representing, on the one hand, gods who provided healing to the sick, and on the other, gods of death. Schiff (2002:186) asserts: ‘The ancient Egyptians cultivated opium poppies, however, the use of opium was generally restricted to priests, magicians, and warriors, and was associated with religious cultism’. This claim is similar to that found in Hoffmann (1990:54), who argues: ‘[R]ecreational use [of opium] did not become popular, and [its] use was mostly limited to medical and some religious practice’.

## **Opioids**

In general, medical experts very often do not distinguish between opiates, which include opium, and opioids, since both groups are narcotics, meaning that they both induce sleeping or numbness (Morley 1981). However, such a distinction does exist, even if it is not obvious. It can be stated that the main conceivable difference between the two is how they are made or produced.

Opiates, which include opium, can be described as chemical compounds extracted from natural plant material, whereas opioids are chemical compounds that are not derived from natural plant material *per se*, but are largely manufactured in a laboratory, or synthesized from the chemical components of opium. Examples of opioids include heroin, hydrocodone, fentanyl, hydromorphone, oxycodone, and oxymorphone.

Although synthetic opioids have for decades been considered one of the most effective drugs to treat pain in general, their mere association with abuse and the risk of addiction continue to lead to serious health problems, raising questions about their appropriateness for society's healthcare (Rosenblum, Marsch, Joseph, & Portenoy 2008:405). It is important to mention at this point that synthetic opioids on their own are generally not dangerous, especially when used or administered responsibly, but mixing synthetic opioids such as heroin and fentanyl can be extremely dangerous and might lead to death (Ciccarone, Ondocsin, & Mars 2017:146).

The feelings of pleasure derived from taking such opioids can make users return to such experiences again and again, which can have negative consequences, such as developing an addiction, illness, or death. Most medical professionals share the concern that more lives will be lost in the coming decades, unless the authorities take adequate actions to stop the spread and use of these synthetic opioids (Pardo, Taylor, Caulkins, Kilmer, Reuter, & Stein 2019:6).

## **Religion as the Opium of the People**

Marx studied the function of religion in people's everyday realities and concluded metaphorically that 'religion is the opium of the masses'. He wrote this expression in 1843 as a marginal note in the introduction to a book of philosophical criticism that he never finished. Although most scholars believe that this dictum made Marx an uncompromising critic of religion (cf. Pedersen 2015:354), some believe that he was merely trying to underscore the important role that religion, in general, has in people's lives (Lefever 1977:3-5). We incline more towards the latter view of the Marxian dictum. Consequently, the positive comparison between religion and opium will be underlined. Subsequently, the recent toxic mixture of religions in South Africa will be compared to opioids as a sort of corrupted form of the idea of religion, as is

the case with how opium is corrupted into opioids. For that reason, this article follows Marx's opium image in a religious context, but consciously expands the discussion to toxic opioids to analogously highlight the dangerous mixture of religions in South Africa.

According to Mckinnon (2005:17), Marx's understanding of opium falls somewhere between the start and the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: '[I]n 1843 it is an ambiguous, multidimensional and contradictory metaphor, expressing both the earlier and later understanding of the fruit of the poppy'. One would be correct to argue that Marx, by declaring that religion is the opium of the people, was merely expressing his compassion for the poor people of his time. However, more importantly, he was formally accusing a certain form of religion, of making delusory promises to people about their future, while at the same time, such promises encouraged poor people to tolerate injustices that they suffered at the hands of the few rich (capitalists) instead of engaging the struggle against their plight.

Marx regarded religion as the sign of the oppressed souls, the spirit of the spiritless system. In this way, he identified an important role that religion should play in providing society with some form of meaning and consolation in the context of suffering. Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) went even further by integrating anesthesia into Marx's original dictum by stating that 'religion is the opium which anesthetizes the people' (Feiya 2008:61). He perhaps added the idea of anesthesia merely to emphasize that religion acts as the suppressor of pain in the context of human suffering. This was indeed consistent with Marx's perspective of the intended use of opium, which is none other than to dull the pain. Thus, according to his analogy (opium), religion ought to play the psycho-therapeutic role which gives assurance, calmness, and serenity of mind in the face of miseries. Okoro (2012:251) cites Townsley (2004:2-3), who agrees with this analysis: 'Religion makes the poor escape from something that does not care for its people in a cycle of oppression'. Thus, religion helps the oppressed masses not to surrender in the fight against distressing conditions of life (Uchegbue 2011:60). Further, he found that religion was used to produce an 'illusionary escape' from depressing social realities.

## **New Prophetic Churches' Points of Contact with Religions as Opium of the People**

The New Prophetic Churches in South Africa are discussed as part of the Pentecostal movement, but are very different from other Pentecostal sub-traditions such as classical Pentecostal churches and independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches (Kgatle 2020b; cf. Kgatle & Mofokeng 2019). These churches are different from other streams because of their emphasis on the gift of prophecy. This kind of prophecy is practiced with emphasis and reliance on the prophets themselves. To receive a prophecy, church members must book appointments with the prophets (Kgatle 2019:4 of 7). It is for this reason that prophets in these churches carry different titles rather than the conventional titles such as reverend, priest, or pastor. In making their prophecies different from biblical and other prophecies, they reveal people's details such as telephone numbers, identity numbers, physical addresses, etc. As these churches have been embroiled in one controversy after another, the purpose of this article is to link these controversies – called opioid religions – to the opium of religion. This is done by first examining how these churches are influenced by other Pentecostal traditions, including African independent churches and African traditional religions.

### **Classical Pentecostalism's Influences on New Prophetic Churches**

In embracing baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, the New Prophetic Churches have been influenced by both classical Pentecostalism in South Africa and the Azusa Street Revival. This is because these movements were founded on the fundamental belief in the Holy Spirit, with which the New Prophetic Churches continue. The main practice of the New Prophetic Churches is the gift of prophecy. However, this gift is still practiced concerning the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Kgatle 2020c:1-2 of 7). Thus, these churches are inspired by the Azusa Street Revival and early Pentecostalism in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Although so many New Prophetic Churches do not emphasize the initial evidence of speaking in tongues, most of them still practice Spirit baptism. Another difference is that the experiences and the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the New Prophetic Churches are not limited only to Spirit baptism, but include other ecstatic experiences. In this article, the difference will also be pointed out between the influence of the use of the Holy Spirit to propagate the abuse of religion, and people's beliefs.

### **Influences of African Traditional Religions**

The New Prophetic Churches are influenced by the African traditional religions in identifying the challenges that people face in the spirit world (Kgatle 2023:1-2 of 9). Anderson (2018:18) defines the spirit world in an African context as consisting of two important parts: The world of witchcraft powers and the world of the spirits. In African traditional religions, the problems that Africans face, manifest in the physical realm, but are caused by the spirit world, i.e., witchcraft and evil spirits. In other words, challenges such as sickness, witchcraft, misfortune, and generational curses are caused by the spirit world. Like the African traditional religions, the New Prophetic Churches believe that every problem that people face, comes from the world of evil spirits and witchcraft – hence the concept of deliverance. Salvation in these churches is not only about conversion, but deliverance from generational curses and misfortunes (Banda 2020:1 of 12). The challenge is the use of the link with the spirit world to abuse religion and the human rights of their followers. These challenges are discussed in the following section, where the opium of religion is problematized.

### **Influences of African Independent Churches**

There are various influences of African independent churches on the New Prophetic Churches concerning the use of healing and deliverance products. Neither of these religious groups, unlike the classical Pentecostals, use the traditional practices of the laying on of hands for divine healing, as they are using healing products such as anointing oil and water. In the New Prophetic Churches, healing is attached to a certain product that can be bought by the followers of these churches to access their healing process (Ramantswana 2018). This associates faith healing with a specific product instead of having faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as in classical Pentecostal churches. This also causes believers to rely on many products rather than have genuine faith in the one who grants this healing. In addition, healing products place the faith of believers in the person of God who sells these products, thus creating a seller and buyer relationship between believers and their pastors or prophets. This results in the commercialization and commodification of the gospel of Jesus Christ within the South African context. Therefore, the New Prophetic Churches are influenced by the African independent churches in the objectification of religion. However, the question remains, How are these healing products contributing to the abuse of religion and people's beliefs?



### **Influences by the Prosperity Gospel**

The New Prophetic Churches in South Africa are also influenced by the prosperity gospel of E.W. Kenyon, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and others (Mashau & Kgatle 2019). This movement is formally known as the faith movement, which preaches a 'claim it and receive it' message and believes in the attainment of health and prosperity. This movement believes that salvation goes beyond conversion and includes the attainment of material blessings in the form of cars, houses, and other blessings. This message is accompanied by the collection of tithes and offerings, which is common in the Pentecostal tradition. In adopting this message, the prophets in New Prophetic Churches teach their members that accepting Jesus includes the blessings of God in the form of tangible things. However, the New Prophetic Churches do not necessarily follow the conventional way of collecting tithes and offerings, but use other means, resulting in the commercialization of the gospel, as discussed in the following section.

### **Religion as an Opioid**

Although religion has been viewed as one of the most effective ways to help people find meaning in life through ethical frameworks or value systems, designed to aid in character building, in recent years, the abuse of religion in general and the Christian religion in particular, seems to be associated mainly with the New Prophetic Churches showing a tendency to mix different teachings. In these churches, the self-appointed spiritual leaders use mixed religious teachings for other purposes to suit their selfish desires, which include the commercialization of the religion itself. Perhaps the appropriate term to refer to this religious mixture is a syncretism of religious hybridity, in which two or more independent religious beliefs are mixed in one religious system (Mofokeng 2021:75; Mokhoathi 2020:9).

As with mixed opioids, this admixture becomes problematic when it is misused, leading to conflict with certain core religious beliefs or the essentially religious character of a particular religious denomination contained in such a mixture. Scholars have struggled to understand the consequences of abused syncretism, which continues to manifest itself through superstitious beliefs, supernatural powers, fear of witchcraft, disputed prophecies, unusual

practices, cultural practices, claims of curing diseases, claims of reversing death, and even claims to cure barrenness.

In South Africa, this syncretism is visibly dominant among the New Prophetic Churches. One could go so far as to state that these churches are inherently a mixture of different forms of religious traditions, particularly the Pentecostal tradition among Christian groups. Although these churches are part of Pentecostalism, their theologies consist of a mixture of various Pentecostal sub-traditions, coupled with influences from African independent churches, African traditional religions, and many other religious traditions. As with opioids, this mix is good in principle (Daniel 2012:10-11; Mofokeng 2021:75), and multiple scholars have sought to describe or explain its inherent origin (Mokhoathi 2020:1-9; Stewart 1999). However, once such syncretism or hybridity is abused, it can dilute, distort, or disrupt the core practices of any tradition involved in such a mix. Moreover, such abuse inevitably results in dangerous religious practices to the detriment of the name of Christianity itself. Accordingly, an attempt is made in the next few sections to show how the New Prophetic Churches in South Africa have been influenced by an admixture of religious groups such as Pentecostals, African independent churches, and African traditional religions, to name but a few.

## **New Prophetic Churches as Opioids of Religion: Abuse of Religious Practices**

Although not exhaustive, below is a list of some mixed teachings that some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches abuse to gratify their selfish desires and even enrich themselves at the expense of the religion and its original teachings, or the opium originality. The religious abuse cases in South Africa, in particular are largely implicated in the distortion of these teachings, as most pastors or self-appointed spiritual leaders claim authority over their substance to first create fear and unrest that can overwhelm the community's sense of security, and second, to enable them to exercise control over their congregants, who in turn will rely on their individualized spiritual abilities.

### **Spirit Baptism**

Almost every religion has its ghost narratives that encompass events and go beyond normality. As is the case with other forms of religion, there is a belief in the spirit world or beliefs in the works of the Holy Spirit, by traditional African religions, particularly within the African independent churches (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013; Kgatle 2018). The idea of Spirit baptism goes deep into the core teachings of Pentecostalism in Christianity and is often associated with or evokes what happened in Acts 2 where the Lord's disciples received the baptism with or in the Holy Spirit. While the phrase 'baptized in the Holy Spirit' is found twice in Acts, first in Acts 1:45 and then in Acts 11:16, its original meaning is contained in Matthew 3:11, where John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus Christ is associated with a baptism that is broader and deeper: 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire'. As Kgatle (2020b:1-2 of 7) notes, by its very nature, Pentecostalism is usually defined as a movement in Christianity that regards baptism in the Holy Spirit as a secondary but central experience, usually after conversion, which is characterized by the global phenomenon of speaking in tongues (Kgatle 2020c:1-6 of 7). Elsewhere, Kgatle (2017:2 of 9) puts it clearly: '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'. Inappropriately, the very idea of Spirit baptism, or the experience and presence of the Spirit itself, has been abused within the New Prophetic Churches, where certain self-appointed spiritual leaders claim to be guided by the Holy Spirit to carry out their unusual practices (Kgatle & Mofokeng 2019:1-2 of 9). Referring to the conduct of Pastor Lesego Daniel, Kgatle (2017:3 of 9) narrates: 'Lesego Daniel instructed his members to eat grass because he claims to have received 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.

Kgatle and Anderson (2020) discuss this challenge further by stating that most of the prophets in the New Prophetic Churches claim to have heard or been instructed by the Holy Spirit in performing dangerous faith practices such as eating snakes and drinking petrol.

### **Witchcraft and Evil Spirits**

Both the concept and practice of witchcraft and belief in its existence have persisted in the world throughout human history (Chinkambako 2017; Gaskill 2008:1069). Traditionally, witchcraft can be described as the somewhat mys-

terious use of magic or supernatural powers to act malevolently and inflict harm upon others (Copland 2020:6; Meel 2013:61-63). As is the case with most religions around the world, most Christian generations from time immemorial have always tried to reject witchcraft and all associated practices (Van Wyk 2004:1206), believing that it is demonically inspired and forms part of the evil referred to in the Lord's prayer, stated in Matthew 6:13: *Deliver us from evil* (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23). It has been noted by several scholars that the Pentecostal tradition, among other Christian organizations, has for years been recognized for its explicit opposition to witchcraft (Merz 2008:216). However, several scholars such as Banda and Masengwe (2018:1 of 10), as well as Kgatle (2020a:132) have noted with growing concern that some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches are fomenting fear of witchcraft as a strategy to attract adherents who, in turn, satisfy their greed for wealth. Kgatle (2020a:133) states that 'the message of deliverance from witches and the power of Satan has been one of the reasons for the growth and expansion of Pentecostalism'. Agreeing with this sentiment, Baloyi (2019:60) puts it bluntly: 'The driving force behind the Pentecostal preachers making use of witchcraft to lure crowds into their churches is that Christians in Africa demonise witchcraft. This eases the job of charismatic preachers who have to convince their audience by using biblically justified witchcraft'.

Kgatle (2020a) tells the story of the self-proclaimed spiritual leader, Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, also known as Major 1, the founder of the Enlightened Christian Gathering Church, as one of those who misuse the fear of witchcraft to fulfill their selfish desires. Bushiri once openly told one of his employees that her husband's ex-wife was casting a spell on her. Unfortunately, while this allegation may have led to the alleged victim's additional loyalty to Major 1, it destabilized both the alleged perpetrator's business income and her marriage (Kgatle 2020a:134).

Perhaps, as in the case of opioids, witchcraft is an easy target for these self-appointed spiritual leaders, simply because it arises haphazardly in the consciousness of most Africans who still firmly believe in the existence of witchcraft and black magic, especially those who still adhere to African world views which are characterized by cultural practices, typically witnessed in tribal religions such as African traditional religions and some African independent churches (Sanou 2017:33; Van Wyk 2004:1205). Banda and Masengwe (2018:2 of 10) cite the argument of Jacobs (2001:26), who also emphasiz-

es that most African believers come from a lineage tainted by a fear of witchcraft: ‘This fear is overbearing to an extent that even after several generations of Christianity, such fear continues to be a motivating force in the lives of some Christians. Many Christians attest to the continued dominance of African Traditional Religions perspective in their post-conversion lives (Banda & Masengwe 2018:2 of 10; cf. Jacobs 2001:26). Similarly, Kgatle (2020a:135) puts it: ‘Thus, in many Pentecostal churches in Africa, it is not enough for a Christian to be born again; they also need deliverance because of the demonic influences on their lives’.

### **Healing and Deliverance Products**

Both the practices of miraculous healing and deliverance were in some ways central to the mortal ministry of Jesus Christ (Mcall 1975; Soares 1910). At the very beginning of his ministry, reading from the prophet Isaiah to explain the purpose and the course for which the Father had sent him, Jesus proclaimed: ‘He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor’ (Mt 4:23-24; Lk 4:18-19). Consistent with this prophecy, Jesus healed the sick from their diseases and delivered those who were oppressed by demons, while at the same time heralding the coming kingdom of God (Onyinah 2009:117). He also instructed his immediate disciples to do the same, whenever he sent them out (Lk 9:1). In other words, he extended his ministry to the early church through his immediate disciples, and also to the modern church. It can be argued that healing, deliverance, and the proclamation of God’s kingdom led many people to follow Jesus and ultimately resulted in the growth of the early church (Mugambi 2020:20-21).

In general, Africans have a strong belief that diseases, ailments, and the like are of supernatural origin or non-human spirits (Onyinah 2009:121). In their view, there is an inherent ontological harmony in the created universe, and any attempt to disrupt that harmony can and will result in a God-imposed morbid or demon-possessed state (Benedict 2014:51; Craffert 2015:1-4 of 9). Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that it has been observed that those practicing African traditional religion do not oppose Western medical means, as they believe some diseases can only be cured through spiritual intervention (Mokgobi 2014:24; White 2015:5-6 of 7).

Mashau (2009:109; 2016:1 of 8) observes that modern times continue to witness the resurgence of a belief in traditional means to counter what

might be perceived as God-imposed suffering or infirmity. Consequently, most African independent churches equally believe in an inherent connection between diseases and healing or deliverance which can only be obtained through spiritual intervention (Modiko 2011; Shoko 2006). It is therefore safe to conclude that even before the advent of Christianity, Africa was quite a fertile ground for a belief in healing from ailments, spiritual deliverance, and/or healing in general which can only be achieved through supernatural means or intervention. In other words, African people in general, including South Africans, were and still are spiritually vulnerable to any claims involving healing and deliverance, especially when such a claim relates to their personal or subjective experience, even though it might not entirely be covered by the teachings of Scripture (Kgatle 2017:7 of 9).

As a result, the issue of both healing and deliverance has predictably become controversial for the church in Africa. It has been observed by several scholars that some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches in Africa and South Africa are taking advantage of these beliefs and continue to abuse them by making false claims just to attract more people to the churches. This in turn increases their chances of accumulating wealth (Chitando & Biri 2016:75; Kgatle 2017:2 of 9; Pondani 2019:29). Ramantswana and Sebetseli (2021:5 of 10) point out that those who ‘gravitate towards the neoprophets do so long to receive the personal divine word, deliverance, healing, blessings, and prosperity’. According to Resane (2017:2, quoted in Kgatle 2017:3 of 9), these churches idolize miraculous healings and deliverance, while self-appointed spiritual leaders in such churches often claim to heal all kinds of ailments and even promise to offer deliverance from forms of bondage such as poverty, unemployment, and childlessness. These leaders will stop for nothing when it comes to making claims that will ultimately attract more people to their churches. Such behavior includes getting parishioners to drink petrol, eat snakes, spray their faces with insecticide, and telling parishioners that they will not be harmed through these acts, as well as many other bizarre claims in the name of Christianity (cf. Kgatle 2017; Thinane 2021).

### **Commercialization and Commodification of Religion**

Almost all the abuses encompassing witchcraft, spirits, healing, and deliverance are commercialized and commodified by self-appointed spiritual leaders in the New Prophetic Churches of Africa, particularly in South Africa. The

core of their purpose is therefore nothing other than accumulating their wealth through the misuse of religious beliefs and practices, or more broadly, the substance of Christ's gospel. Scholars such as Benyah (2018), Masenya and Masenya (2018), Banda (2019), and Andrew (2021), have penned the extent to which the religion and gospel of Christ are being commercialized and commodified by self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches in Africa and especially in South Africa. In their quest to amass their wealth, these leaders continue to disregard the sanctity of these practices within religious communities, particularly within Christianity. As a result, they have become instant millionaires, living lavish lifestyles, while the congregants who remain in desperate need of divine intervention or genuine deliverance, continue to suffer miserably.

Just as is the case with opioids used for non-medical purposes, religious practices and the gospel of Christ are used illicitly by some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches for non-religious purposes, characterized by selfish desires for wealth, which have led to an increasingly commercialized and commodified form of opioid religion in Africa and South Africa in particular. They do so with no regard for the damage done to the spiritual wellbeing of their followers since, as with many pharmaceutical companies regarding the sale of opioids, they only care about their chances of amassing wealth at all costs, even if their conduct contradicts the very religious teachings they claim to uphold.

## **Recommendations**

In this article, the New Prophetic Churches were established as a Pentecostal stream in the mix based on their points of contact with classical Pentecostal churches, African independent churches, and African traditional religions. While there is nothing wrong with these churches learning from different religious movements, the challenge is that they have negatively used this mix and produced some level of abuse, as discussed above. There is nothing wrong with the work of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, but the same Holy Spirit cannot be used to abuse religion.

While New Prophetic Churches use healing products to help their followers attain divine healing, the challenge comes when such products are used to the detriment of the health of their followers and are commercialized

to the benefit of the prophets as sellers of these products. In addition, the challenge of linking every problem to the spirit world is that sometimes, the New Prophetic Churches spiritualize challenges that are the responsibility of the governments in Africa. Not every problem is caused by the spirit world or by witchcraft or evil spirits. To deal with these challenges, the following are suggested:

- First, the New Prophetic Churches must find their own identity rather than always copying or mixing their religion with different religious movements such as Pentecostalism and traditional religions in what we conceptualize here as the opium of religion. The challenge for these churches is that each time they move from one direction to another, they find themselves abusing religion because they lack identity. This lack of identity ultimately results in these churches having no proper founding principles and values that will make them accountable to society as part of popular religion.
- Second, the practices of religion should be consistent with the mission of God on earth. The important question is: How are these practices aligned with the mission of God in reaching out to the lost people in the world? If a religious practice is not aligned with the mission of God on earth, it is not worth pursuing. Therefore, before performing any act of religion or even miracles, pastors should ask themselves how it will help to enhance the mission of God on earth. Otherwise, it becomes an act of entertainment, or worse, it becomes an act of abusing the very people of God. Consequently, the practices of religion in these churches should align with the basic foundational teachings of the Christian tradition, specifically because these churches have identified themselves as Christian. Therefore, returning to the mission of God, identifying themselves in Christ, and adhering to the fundamental tenets of the Christian tradition, will help the movement return to religion as opium.
- Third and last, the practices of religion in these churches should align with the basic foundational teachings of the Christian tradition, specifically because these churches have identified themselves as being Christian. The practice of religion should be systematically aligned with the basic systematic Pentecostal doctrines such as angelology, bibliology, ecclesiology, Christology, pneumatology, eschatology,



hamartiology, soteriology, theological anthropology, and theology proper. If the New Prophetic Churches are part of the Christian tradition, they should also align with these main systematic theological doctrines in their practice of religion. There cannot be practices that are inconsistent with traditional practices, even if they claim that the Holy Spirit is encouraging such practices. In other words, theology and religious scholars must advance a research agenda that identifies a range of religious hybrids that are being abused to the point where they become a *leitmotif* for the wellbeing of society – the broad lines of religions in general, and in particular of the churches that do not correspond to the basic teachings of the Christian religion.

## **Conclusion**

This article drew on literary analysis to discuss the misuse of religious teachings from their original substance, referred to as opium, to their mishandled versions, referred to as opioid religions, which subvert the original good intentions inherent in these religious teachings. It likened the original forms of religious teachings with opium religion, whereas the corrupted form of such religious influences is likened to opioid forms of religion whereby the latter refers to a somewhat dangerous mix of religious teachings, advocated by self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this work is that the uncoordinated admixture of religious teachings by some self-appointed spiritual leaders within the New Prophetic Churches, particularly those observed in South Africa, has inexorably contributed to the perpetuation of abusive religious practices through disregard and violation of basic human rights. To remedy this situation, this article recommended that the New Prophetic Churches should find their identity in Christ, rather than mixing their religious teachings to suit the selfish interests of individuals. This could only be achieved if these leaders employ practices that aim to fulfill God's mission (*Missio Dei*) or that are consistent with basic Christian teachings as practiced and advocated by other Christian churches around the world.

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