

Editorial:

Abuse of Religion, and Gullibility in the Public Sphere in South(ern) Africa

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In 2015, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (the CRL Rights Commission), which is one of the Chapter Nine Institutions according to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, launched an investigation into the ‘Commercialisation of Religion and Abuse of People’s Belief Systems’. In June 2017, a report was tabled to Parliament with proposals that seek to regulate and license all religions in South Africa. Accordingly, all religious practitioners must be registered and fall under umbrella organisations that will use their respective monitoring mechanisms regularly. The commission also called for stringent rules to be applied by the Department of Home Affairs with regard to the regulation of foreign religious leaders who are involved or part of churches in South Africa. (See for instance, Mdakane 2017; CRL Rights Commission 2017; and Mkhwanazi-Xaluva 2017.)

Against this background, and independent from the project of our colleagues from Zimbabwe (cf. Bishau 2020, *Alternation* Sp. Ed. 35 2020), the investigation in South Africa, of which we publish some articles in this issue of *Alternation*, was prompted by the abuse of religious rights by religious leaders, and the continued gullibility of the public, when it comes to the wide variety of projects and schemes related to the commercialisation of religion.

The University of South Africa project on ‘abuse of religion and the gullibility of the public in South(ern) Africa’ was initiated within the College of Human Sciences (CHS) at UNISA for two reasons.

Firstly, it served to provide a forum for reflection and a critical voice in the public square, regarding some of the bizarre activities conducted in the name of religion in a variety of organisations in South Africa. *Secondly*, it was

also initiated to critically engage the regulations concerning religions, proposed by the CRL Rights Commission.

The scope of research covered events, activities and practices dating from the apartheid era to date. Hence, the issue of church and land is also addressed.

The research for the project takes as its basis, the right and freedom to belong to and practice a religion of choice, which is enshrined and protected in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

With regard to the facts of a sample of religious malpractices that have been reported on widely in the media, we have, for instance, witnessed a growing phenomenon of ‘doom’ prophets who abuse their unsuspecting followers by feeding them snakes, grass and petrol, or spray them with doom for purification purposes, in the name of religion.

Some extort money from their followers. They use dubious and underhanded financial get-rich-quickly programmes like pyramid schemes, or charge exorbitant amounts of money for one-on-one sessions between the client and ‘the prophet’.

It has also been reported that some even sleep and have sex with young girls as well as with young unmarried or married women for religious purposes. One case that has been widely reported on, is that of the alleged sex pest scandal related to Timothy Omotoso of a Jesus Dominion International Church in Port Elizabeth.

The issue of the commercialization of religion and profiteering, has also seen the emergence of the so-called ‘paparazzi’ or ‘celebrity’ pastors.

At the heart of all these challenges, and if they do not only relate to financial gain and extortion, or sexual gratification and forms of material opportunism, it appears there might also be aspects of the occult.

But be this as it may.

Through all these reports and alleged forms of the exploitation of the public we do have to recognise that these malpractices can only find material expression due to the gullibility of different South African publics. Gullible members of our publics – often due to their own experiences of hopelessness and discontent – succumb to the empty promises and practices of charlatan ‘pastors’, and ‘prophets’. Some of these prophets seem to be doing so blindly, because they are, in the biblical expression, ‘sheep without a shepherd’. From within their hopelessness, people follow, believe and pay these religious leaders, as if they are caught under their spell, or even as being hypnotized.

So, without a doubt, these practices require serious scrutiny and reasonable analysis and sensitive discernment.

Hence, it is hoped that this special edition of *Alternation* on ‘Abuse of Religion, and Gullibility in the Public Sphere in South(ern) Africa’, will make a small contribution to the analysis of the problem of the gullibility of the public, in view of forms of religious exploitation. It is also hoped that it may spark the continuous engagement of this matter of the gullibility of the public, and so, provides a creative space, to allow both academics and the ordinary religious follower or believer, in the dusty roads of our villages and informal settlements and those coming from the pavements of our cities, to engage and seek long term solutions to the challenges identified above.

We have to critically think how we think, and teach about religion, but also how we practice and adhere to our respective religious systems.

To ensure that religious rights and freedoms are not abused, but used for the benefit of all citizens in our country, academia has to play its data generation and data analytical and interpretation roles as well as its role in facilitating constructive engagements of academia and the public, and vice versa.



After having screened and followed the processes and procedures of double-blind peer reviews by academics, the following articles were accepted for publication in this special edition of *Alternation*.

The article by **Christof Sauer** and **Georgia du Plessis**, ‘**Safeguarding Freedom of Religion or Belief: Assessing the Recommendations of the CRL Rights Commission in the Light of International Human Rights Standards**’, serves as a basis upon which the discussion around the abuse of religious rights and the protection thereof, are founded. Using International Human Rights Standards, Sauer and Du Plessis critically analyse their research focus and also caution that CRL rights in South Africa, should guard against the abuse of their Constitutional mandate in their approach. As a way forward, the article encourages the CRL to be as transparent as possible in their approaches of studying alleged abuses of CRL rights, and also to learn to respect religious communities in their own right. This is an approach that encourages open dialogue in an effort to seek lasting solutions to challenges of religious abuse in South Africa.

Zuze Banda's, 'Touch the screen': Christian Television and its Influences and Challenges to the Church in South Africa, speaks to challenges that come with the emergence of the uses and abuses of Christian television, or the so-called multi-media mission approach. Banda notes that while the uses of religious television media may be helpful for some, and may present a welcome and dynamic approach to doing missions, it simultaneously exposes forms of the abuse of Christianity and some of the forms of its traditional ways of ministry and mission. Challenges relate not only to the abusers themselves, which may be good, but also to Christian groups, by losing membership and revenue. It is Banda's thesis that the traditional Church is advised to contend with this new environment if it has to survive the new realities going into the future. As his topic indicates, the South African public should be wary and employ discernment, of religious leaders who claim that the touching of television screens will bring healing, or when the 'touch the screen' approach is embraced by prophets to gain more members and, or revenue.

In his article, **'Developing a Theology of Discernment in Response to the Abuse of Religion by some Pentecostal Churches in Postcolonial South Africa'**, **Mookgo Solomon Kgatle** looks at the issue of religious abuse by some Pentecostal church pastors in South Africa. He affirms some of the observations by the CRL commission around bizarre activities. According to Kgatle, these pastors have been involved in controversial, criminal and fake miracle practices that point to the abuse of religion. The article also speaks about the gullibility of the public in that some of the members of these churches follow and engage in these activities, like the eating of grass and the drinking of petrol, without question. The author points out that many South Africans have become gullible to the abuse of religion given their economic conditions, gender injustices, and for theological and psychological reasons. The article concludes by proposing that churches and the public at large should embrace the spirit of discernment and be able to critique every action by prophets in the light of the Scriptures.

In **'Perceptions on the Relevance of Black African Faith based Structures in Democratic South Africa'**, **Ntokozo Mthembu** deals with perceptions of the relevance of black African faith-based structures in democratic South Africa. He tries and dissect the rationale behind *abefundisi*, pastors and their churches who adopt a specific rite, such as water baptism, the use of detergents – that is Jik and other related artefacts – to perform their 'perceived' function of healing and praying for sick individuals. He analyses and confronts the

challenge of the ‘colonial trappings’ and the spirit of consumer culture by black African faith-based structures.

Phillip Musoni’s article, **‘Touch not mine anointed! An Enchanted Worldview within the Millennium African Pentecostal Churches (MAPs)’**, explores the impact of Pentecostalism and the abuse of religion from a South(ern) African perspective. Musoni uses the example of the Millennium African Pentecostal Churches (MAPCs) in Zimbabwe, and South Africa. He interrogates their worldview and mindset which seem to involve the un-critical support of prophets or leaders of these churches, as the anointed ones of God – whose support should be unconditional. Musoni also exposes the abuse of the office of founders and leaders of this typology of churches. Accordingly, the article concludes by highlighting that it is the propagation of ‘gap theology’ that has sustained the unremitting abuses of religious offices within the MAPCs today.

In **‘A Critical Appraisal of the Silence and Apathy of the Church Regarding Land Reform with Special Reference to the Lutheran Church as a Case Study: Towards Making the Church a Caring and Humanising Institution’**, **Olehile A. Buffel** critically explores abuse of religion with regard to the scandal around church land. He looks closely at the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) as a significant land owner, but land that has been received during the colonial era – an era of the perceived marriage between Christian mission and imperialists. He advocates for an approach where the church can contribute significantly in restoring humanity to society and creating a caring and humane society, by the compassionate distribution of land to dispossessed blacks. Buffel contends that the church is supposed to be a caring and humanizing institution. In this instance, the church is encouraged not to turn a blind eye to the perpetual injustice of the landlessness of blacks.

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