Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2024, Vol 10, No 2, 1–23
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2024.v10n2.19
Online ISSN 2226-2385 | Print ISSN 2413-9459

How the public nature of theology could address the proliferation of unaccredited theological qualifications in Africa

Collium Banda
North-West University
Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa
collium@gmail.com

Abstract

The proliferation of questionable theological qualifications thrives on a privatised perception of theology that treats studying theology as a private matter between the believer and God. Unregistered theological institutions issuing 'fake qualifications' do so based on the perception that they are dealing with something private between God and them. This perception is undergirded by the belief that if God is pleased with their institutions, they do not need the approval of any human authority. This article argues that this privatised view of theology is challenged by the public nature of the Christian God, which means that any reflection on God should be done openly and be subject to public scrutiny. Therefore, this article calls African Pentecostals who are issuing fake qualifications and refusing to register with governing authorities, to recognise the public nature of theology, which means that theological institutions should meet public requirements for registrations. Equally, students that enrol in these unregistered institutions should be challenged to realise the public nature of theological education. This article therefore examines the public nature of theological education as a means of addressing the proliferation of questionable theological qualifications among African Pentecostal churches.

Keywords

Public; privatisation; theological education; unaccredited theological qualifications; prophets; neo-Pentecostalism

1. Introduction

The privatisation of theological reflection significantly contributes to the proliferation of what is designated "fake theological qualifications". Rather

than using the emotionally charged term "fake theological qualifications", I have chosen to employ "unaccredited qualifications". This is because I believe many Christians enrol in the unregistered theological institutions not to obtain counterfeit qualifications, but from a genuine desire to be educated in the true spiritual faith of the Bible, untouched by human reasoning. This quest for pure spiritual faith uncontaminated by human reason leads to the privatisation of theology by treating theological reflection as not a public affair but a private affair between the believer and God. Although this article critiques the privatisation of theological education among African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs), the privatisation of theological education can also be found in non-Pentecostal churches as well.

The aim of this article is to critique the privatised view of theology and its consequent promotion of the proliferation of questionable qualifications among ANPPs. The article is limited to perceptions about theology that foster ANPPs to shy away from accredited theological institutions and accept backdoor questionable theological qualifications. The critique is done by pointing out the public or transparent nature of theology, which means theological education should be willing to be subjected to the public scrutiny of state educational authorities. The ANPPs are the primary focus of this article because their privatised view of theology has become prominent for its unabashed disparagement of and disregard for the government's accreditation requirements. The ANPPs brazenly offer unaccredited higher degrees at master's and doctoral levels, often with notably substandard instruction and requirements. Resane (2017a:4) notes that despite the government's accreditation requirements, some Pentecostal-charismatic groups brazenly offer unaccredited pastoral training, doing so with a remarkable sense of impunity. I contend that ANPPs audaciously and persistently offer unaccredited degrees, even in the face of stern government warnings, and conduct lavish public graduation ceremonies, out of a privatised conviction of spiritual superiority over other Christians and civic authorities.

What is meant by the public nature of theology must not be confused with the specialised field called public theology or political theology where theology engages public, political and economic issues. Rather, by the "public nature of theology" is meant that although Christian theology deals with matters of faith in an invisible God, and many aspects that can

be viewed as subjective, it is nonetheless not a closed or hidden discipline that does not follow universally accepted objective and critical rigorous academic and educational systems. Christian theology is public because it is concerned not just with our hearts, but also with what has been heard, seen and touched (1 John 1:1). In other words, theology must be treated holistically, which involves all our human senses. This means theological reflection entails a public aspect.

Therefore, the focus of this article is limited to how the public nature of theology challenges the privatisation of theological education that leads to unaccredited theological qualifications among ANPPs. The article is limited to critiquing the esoteric perceptions of Christian theology that promote ANPPs to shy away from having their education programmes publicly accredited. The aim of the article is fulfilled by first, briefly describing the ANPPs. Secondly, the privatisation of theology is defined. Thirdly, is described the perception, among ANPPs, that the privatisation of theology is necessary to protect true faith from contamination by worldly philosophies. Fourthly, is critiqued the uncritical nature of privatised Pentecostal theological education. Fifthly, is described how the public nature of theology challenges the privatisation of theological education. Sixthly, the article closes by suggesting how the public nature of theology can liberate theological education from privatisation.

A brief description of African neo-Pentecostal prophets

The African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs) are part of the larger Pentecostal-charismatic Christian community (Kgatle 2021, 2022, Kgatle & Anderson 2020). They are Pentecostal in every sense in their form as they hold on to the main Pentecostal attributes such as speaking in tongues, miracles and prophecy. The ANPPs however set themselves apart by the presence of prophetic figures who claim to be specially anointed by God, thus believing they are not accountable to any human authority but only to God (Gunda & Machingura, 2013; Kgatle, 2019; 2021; Ramantswana, 2019). It is important to note that, in general, the emphasis in Pentecostal and charismatic leadership is "on the spirituality of the leader rather than on intellectual abilities or even ministerial skills" (Anderson, 2004:6). The prophets' assertion of possessing direct access to God's new and

fresh anointing and revelation makes them highly sought-after sources of divine knowledge. Consequently, Christians who enrol in their theological programs do so with the aspiration of receiving spiritual guidance from these divinely appointed men of God (Resane, 2017b:3).

The ANPPs present themselves as working under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, and they view their lecturers as called by God and anointed by him to teach his word. These prophets have a steadfast conviction that secular authorities who seek to obstruct them cannot deter them from carrying out God's work. Hence, numerous Christians are attracted to the unaccredited colleges associated with the ANPPs because they believe these institutions offer a spiritually elevated theological education that brings them closer to the divine power of God. The ANPPs, in turn, regard theological education as a private affair, beyond public scrutiny. This privatisation of theological education within the ANPPs is examined from the perspective of the intrinsically public nature of theological education.

Conceptualising the privatisation of theology

When critiquing the privatisation of theology among ANPPs, it is important to acknowledge that this is a phenomenon that has persisted since the inception of Christianity and one that will continue to evolve in various forms. For example, Wells (1993), Noll (1994), and McGrath (1996) have bemoaned the disappearance of critical theological thought among Evangelical Christians in North America. Likewise, Kretzschmar (1998) conducted an analysis of the privatisation of theology among South African Baptists. Additionally, Kretzschmar (1997; 2023) highlights that this is a widespread issue that affects numerous Christians across various denominations.

"Privatisation" is used in this article to refer to the narrow treatment of theology as a personal activity that is confined between God and the individual. Kretzschmar (1998:1) defines "the privatisation of faith" as "the limitation of the Christian Gospel to the private, spiritual concerns of the individual". In Kretzschmar's usage, the privatisation of the Christian faith regards the connection between an individual and God as a private affair with no bearing on public concerns, including political and social

issues. The privatisation of theology confines theological reflection to an individualistic experience that is not open to public analysis or questioning. It views theology as a bilateral relationship solely between God and the believer, excluding the broader community and the world from the discourse.

This limitation of theology to people's private and spiritual concerns treats theology as a subjective heart issue only. It projects true faith in God as irrational affections of God and denounces the use of reason in matters of faith. Kretzschmar (1998:2) adds that "a privatised Gospel either deliberately avoids the public sphere or responds to it in an uncritical or ineffective manner". In other words, the privatisation of faith conceives faith as purely concerned with relating to God and excludes any social and political implications that arise because of one's faith in God. This means that privatisation of theology follows an unquestioning approach that avoids critical analysis of faith and faith's relationship with the world.

A natural consequent of privatisation of theology is the narrow spiritualistic view of theological education as purely concerned with developing a spiritual heart that fosters a subservient unquestioning mind. The focus on developing a spiritual heart and promoting a subservient unquestioning mind leads to uncredited theological institutions with academically unqualified faculty members who are accepted on the basis of their charisma. Instead of cognitively knowledgeable faculty the stress is placed on charism, which is viewed as God's anointing, and therefore more desirable than a qualification acquired through academic rigour.

Since this article is prompted by the proliferation of questionable qualifications among ANPPs, an ideal illustration will be drawn from that tradition. This approach is exemplified by the Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostal prophetic couple, Beverly and Urbert Angel. In their 2014 daily devotional booklet, Power for Today: Jump-starting Your Day: Daily Devotional, they made the following statement on 21 January (Angel & Angel, 2014:n.p.),

> Cease from declaring negative confessions, instead decree and declare life into your situation, say the same things which God has declared over your life. *Don't get entangled by facts, speak truth and act upon it* (italics added).

This devotional statement privatises faith by discarding critical thinking and encourages people to simply follow positive thinking and positive confession, regardless of the factual condition of their reality. Even if the facts indicate that the person is bankrupt or suffering from a serious illness like cancer, they are encouraged to ignore those facts and instead confess that they are wealthy or healed. This use of faith, in line with Kroesbergen's (2019:4) observation, aligns with the African traditional religious perspective, which primarily revolves around "power and pragmatic ways to uses it".

Additionally, Resane (2017a:4) further highlights that neo-Pentecostal charismatic theology is not focused on "any formulation of dogma, but on experience". In this context, faith is used as a private tool to achieve specific outcomes. Faith is kept private, while external factors contributing to financial distress are often left unaddressed. Consequently, the theological education that informs and undergirds such as an approach to faith is a privatised one that demonises critical thinking and the acceptance of the factual realities that affect people. A similar framework is followed by another Zimbabwean prophet, Walter Magaya (2015:n.p.), who declared:

> The worst person today is the Pastor or Apostle who is still teaching congregants that we shall rejoice in heaven and we must be ready to suffer here on earth. That's heresy, you are busy preaching doom in those churches right on the altar by the pulpit [sic].

Magaya's assertion that deems it heretical to instruct individuals that they will find joy in heaven and must endure suffering on earth contributes to the privatisation of theological education. This stance circumvents the necessity for rigorous critical evaluation that objectively scrutinises the truthfulness of one's faith. Such churches further privatise theological education by adopting a theological education system that only reinforces, promotes, and protects parochial theological positions. Some ANPPs emphasise the idea of "having the call of God" or the "anointing of God" in ways that devalue the process of theological training (Banda, 2017:50). They give the impression "that the 'called' and 'anointed' have no need to undergo a lengthy, demanding and rigorous theological programme of study" (Banda, 2017:50). Moreover, theological education is privatised through the emphasis on experientialism, which cannot be subject to

public scrutiny. This approach projects faith driven solely by individual intensity rather than faith in a God who performs miracles. ANPPs need to be encouraged to critically assess the risks associated with this privatised approach to theological education, as it fosters a form of faith that discourages critical thinking.

Privatisation of theology as preventing the contamination of true faith

However, a case can be presented in favour of the privatisation of theological education as a means of safeguarding genuine biblical and Christian faith from the influence of secular wisdom. As Resane (2017a:3) highlights in the context of C. Peter Wagner's motivation, many Pentecostal-charismatic Christians steer clear of traditional theological education due to what they perceive as "current maladies of theological seminaries". This implies that theological education is avoided because of concerns about liberal teachings and academic knowledge that they believe do not align with the mission of the church.

Many accounts exist of individuals who were deeply passionate about their faith and dedicated to God before embarking on their university or seminary studies, only to witness a decline in their fervour during their educational journey. While it is expected that critical studies should lead to a more informed understanding of God, the loss of enthusiasm and love for God and ministry as a consequence of one's engagement in critical theological studies often dissuades many well-intentioned Christians from pursuing such programs. These instances serve as common examples that many Christians use to criticise traditional theological education in universities and advocate for non-critical confessional theological curricula instead (Anderson, 2004:2; Brodie, 2011: 48-49; Resane 2017a:4).

Biblical grounds can indeed be cited as a basis for the privatisation of theology. For instance, in Colossians 2:8, Christians are encouraged to exercise vigilance in protecting themselves from being ensnared "through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ". There are several such biblical warnings to Christians to diligently pursue "sound

doctrine" and avoid the contamination of false doctrines. Many Christians base their privatisation of theological education on the biblical grounds for Christians to carefully safeguard their life and doctrine (2 Tim 4:16). The Bible does command Christians to be wary of false doctrines and avoid them. Thus, some Christians privatise theological education by avoiding registered institutions such as universities because they view those academic institutions as factories of heresies.

In the pursuit of preserving genuine faith, theological education has encountered a significant challenge dating back to the Enlightenment. This challenge is associated with the scientific and rationalistic emphasis on evidence and epistemology, which often excluded the role of God in public life (Balcomb, 2015:5-6). Scientific rationalism indeed raises questions and, at times, denies God's sovereignty in human affairs and the world.[1] The ultimate effect of scientific rationalism in theology is rationalistic theology, which approaches matters of faith with an inherent scepticism, demanding that God and the Bible first provide proof of their truth before being accepted and believed. Scientific rationalism challenges numerous theological tenets by questioning anything that cannot be logically and scientifically verified. Much of the privatisation of theology has developed out of the fear of rationalistic influences in theology, which questioned traditional Christian doctrines, such as the infallibility of the Bible, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and the occurrences of miracles.

The privatisation of theological education often prospers due to concerns about the public academy being perceived as a threat to genuine faith, with a mission to undermine belief in God. Registering his concern about the anti-faith and anti-God tendencies in the American academy, McGrath (1996:15) avers: "The days are long since past in which 'the academy' was equated with learning, wisdom and personal integrity". Referring to the modern American academy, McGrath (1996:15) says, it "seems to have more to do with elitism, ideological warfare and rampant anti-religious propaganda than learning". At the core of Christian concerns regarding

1 However, it is important to note that this marginalisation of theology in the West was not just a result of revolution of education, but also the church's loss of its role as the authoritative leader in society after losing "its intellectual credibility through a series of blunders where it set itself up against scientific discoveries" (Balcomb, 2015:6). This problem remains true today.

critical theological education is the perception that it is centred on human perspectives and designed to undermine genuine faith in God. Building upon McGrath's observations, the privatisation of theology can be linked to a prevailing belief among Christians that the academy is anti-Christian; therefore, it is 'spiritual suicide' for churches to send their ministers to train in public institutions. This sentiment, which regards the public academy as an adversary of Christianity, is a significant factor behind the establishment of under-resourced Bible colleges and seminaries. These institutions often struggle to sustain themselves but are kept afloat by churches as a means of preserving pure faith (Banda, 2017:50).

The privatisation of theological education can also be attributed to the disconnect between academic theology and everyday church life. As McGrath (1996:16) points out, "There is a widespread perception within the churches that academic theology has largely lost whatever connections it may once have had with the mission, concerns and life of the church". McGrath highlights the unfortunate point that often the agenda of the academy is irrelevant to the mission, concern, and life of the church. It can be argued that theological education in universities tends to be overly cerebral and detached from the spiritual needs of the church and society. Balcomb (2015:3) aptly illustrates this point by retelling the following hypothetical story by John Mbiti:

> John Mbiti tells the story of a theological graduate returning home to Africa with a PhD from a Western institution. He arrived amidst high expectations of what his great accomplishment and newfound wisdom would do for his community. During the home-coming festivities there is a shriek from his older sister who falls to the ground in a fit. The chief diagnoses immediately that she is being troubled by the spirit of her great aunt and the people expect their returning hero to be able to deal with the problem. Instead he calls for her to be taken to hospital but it is quickly pointed out to him that this is a case that hospitals cannot cure. He turns to his books of Western theology and discovers that Bultmann has demythologised the issue of spirit possession. To the acute despair and embarrassment of everyone, most of all himself, he is utterly helpless in the situation. Mbiti ends his story with the following words: 'Fantasy? No, for these are the realities of our time'.

This hypothetical story vividly portrays theological intellectualism that remains disconnected from the spiritual and psychological struggles of the people. Balcomb (2015:3-4) astutely interprets Mbiti's story as a reflection of how "Western theological education, far from equipping African graduates for ministry back home, alienates them from their faith, their context, and their people". At the core of this sense of alienation lies the absence or erosion of relevance to the local context, as much of what is taught in the academy is foreign and lacks practical applicability to one's immediate environment. Kgatle (2018:4) reinforces Balcomb's concerns about the alienation brought about by Western theological education in Africa, stating:

> The curriculum is also inconsistent with the lived experiences of the majority of African people. Often, the curriculum does not speak to the experiences of students because the curriculum does not reflect the philosophical, social and technological realities of their environment.

Anderson (2004: 6) presents a sobering account, reminding us "that many of the early Pentecostal leaders in Europe and North America and some of the most successful indigenous pastors in many parts of the world have been those with little theological education, or none at all". He underscores a concern raised by the Swiss sociologist Lalive d'Epinay in the 1960s, who drew a sharp contrast between the notably successful indigenous Pentecostal pastors in Chile, many of whom had little or no education, and the "complete stagnation" of the Methodists and Presbyterians, whose pastors possessed high educational levels (Anderson, 2004: 6). This remains true today as most of the successful and prominent ANPPs have limited or no theological training, raising pertinent questions about the significance of theological education in achieving successful ministry. It is ironic that while in Europe and North America, the credibility of a Christian leader is often determined by their academic qualifications, in Africa, a Christian leader's credibility tends to be assessed by their ability to facilitate and demonstrate spiritual experiences. These factors ultimately lead to the privatisation of theological education in Africa.[2]

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2 See Kroesbergen's (2019) article, 'Religion without Belief and Community in Africa' on the African dynamics that promote experience over belief in Africa.

Another problem is that theological education in Africa continues to rely on Western epistemologies. Naidoo (2017:4) bemoans that "much of the theological reflection [in Africa] remains captive to a western model of theologising: foreign theological content, methodology and languages". Similarly, Anderson (2004:7) finds that many "Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are clones of western forms of theologizing and new initiatives in providing relevant theological education for third-world contexts are very few and far between".

Furthermore, it is not just ANPPs who are sceptical of universities; many churches and individual Christians reject theological education from recognised institutions because they perceive it as a threat to genuine faith that diminishes people's passion for God by undermining the authority of God and the Bible. Anderson (2004:1) sheds light on how departments of theology and religious studies in Europe often create a challenging environment where liberal and pluralistic theological agendas appear to be in direct contrast to Pentecostal/charismatic spirituality and exclusivity. Various Christian groups may express a similar view. Naidoo (2017:3) points out that "universities have always lived with the tensions between the disinterested pursuit of truth and the need to put knowledge to practical use". There is a concern that universities may prioritise the logic of ideas over the establishment and defence of truth as intended by God.

Uncritical thinking in privatised unaccredited theological institutions

In addition to the reasons previously mentioned for the privatisation of theological education, a significant issue among ANPPs is the portrayal of theology as esoteric knowledge acquired through a connection with the prophet and not through a process of critical learning. Rather than being a system of critical reflection on faith, theology is often centred around impartation from the prophet. The emphasis on impartation creates the perception that the prophets receive their training and qualifications direct from God and therefore do not need to undergo theological training. Such leaders often disparage rigorous theological training as the unspiritual acquisition of human wisdom. This esoteric spirituality is emphasised as if rigorous theological training is unspiritual. However, learning through

impartation maybe positively viewed as mentoring and a model of how Jesus trained his disciples. However, a serious problem with theological education through prophetic impartation is that the entire system is based on a privatised view of theology that undermines critical thinking and academic rigour. It promotes a theological system that prizes pragmatism and motivational preaching instead of grounding students on factually constructed doctrinal knowledge (Kgatle, 2021:143).

As noted earlier, the teachings of Prophetess Beverly and her prophet husband, Urbert Angel, promote the idea that their followers should not become entangled with facts but should speak the truth and act upon it. Such teachings can hinder critical thinking among Christians by emphasising unquestioning obedience to the prophet's teachings. This perspective sees faith not as a matter of factual belief but as a pragmatic approach to life. Kroesbergen (2019:6) highlights that in African Pentecostalism, believers are often:

> not so much told what to believe, but he or she is told which steps to follow and which principles to apply in order to achieve one's goals, that is, the practical benefits that religion in Africa is supposed to deliver.

In buttressing this point, Kroesbergen (2019:7) avers:

> Faith in the context of African Neo-Pentecostalism is often not about someone's inner state, but about improving one's situation in the world.

Therefore, much of the religion of ANPPs is not cognitive but pragmatic; preaching and teaching are motivational and not doctrinal. The teaching often emphasises that individuals should refrain from employing cognitive analytical skills and, instead, alter their circumstances by embracing positive beliefs with their hearts. For that matter, a typical ANPP's church service is not based on theological facts but on spiritual experience. This is because one's beliefs about God can regulate how one encounters God. Here, the mind or reason are perceived as adversaries of faith. Consequently, the theological curriculum followed in these churches does not focus on cultivating a critical religious mindset but rather a confessional one that

uncritical accepts religious dogmas without critically analysing them (Brodie, 2011:48-49).

The uncritical thinking fostered among the ANPPs often entails unquestioning obedience to the prophets. The emphasis is placed on the spiritual power and authority of the leader and not on objective theological facts. This leads to a religion that is based on the subjective charisma and power of the leader, instead of objective facts that can stand alone independent of the leader which can also be used to hold the prophet accountable. This is because the prophets are viewed as spiritually superior, being perceived as closer to God than other believers. This superior proximity to God elevates the prophets to an unquestioned status in the church. As Resane (2017a:3-4) explains, for groups like the ANPPs, "the local church occupies the centre stage of ordaining the new pastors or church workers. The church staff members are home grown, trained in conferences and are local church DNA compliant". However, Resane could also say the prophets occupy the centre stage of ordaining the new pastors or church workers and that they are trained to be prophet DNA compliant. The stature of the prophet is the foundation of the theological reflection, for in their theological curriculum the prophets attempt to reproduce themselves in their students. The goal is to extend and enforce their prophetic influence over their students.

Takura Rukwati, a dedicated follower of Prophet Makandiwa, underscores the central role of the prophet and the need to be prophet DNA compliant. Rukwati (2012) outlines several characteristics of the prophet, including having a direct connection to heaven, and being a fore-teller as well as forth-teller. Rukwati (2012:n.p.) adds:

> Our father in the Lord Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, in United Family International Church, is a typical example of a prophet of that calibre whom the Lord has given to us as gift.

In this statement, Makandiwa is elevated to a sacred status by being presented as equal to the biblical prophets and following in their foot-steps. The issue here is that Makandiwa is not valued primarily as a communicator of truth who explains and expounds upon the Bible; instead, he is treasured for his role as a provider of spiritual experiences. The sacralisation of Makandiwa aligns with Kroesbergen's (2019:15) elaboration on Baëta's (1962:6-7)

perspective of the prophetic figure. According to this view, a prophetic figure is seen as an "individual endowed with a striking personality and the ability to impose his own will on others, believing himself, and believed by others to be a special agent of some supernatural being or force" (Baëta's 1962:6-7). The absence of critical thinking fostered by privatised Pentecostal theological education encourages unquestioning reliance and obedience to the prophet.

Further sacralising Makandiwa, Rukwati (2012:n.p.) adds,

> In Amos 3:7, God promised that He will not do even a single thing among His people before He reveals it to His servants, the Prophets. The Prophets therefore are said to be among members that seat [sic] in the council of God. Prophets are the first to know the mind of God then relay it to the people. The prophets are the eyes and minds of God, members of the heavenly cabinet. This is why there is always a violent reaction from the heavens when his prophets are touched, embarrassed, harassed, persecuted or killed. [sic]

There is room for some alignment with Rukwati's notion of biblical prophets as foretellers and forthtellers of God's Word. In Amos 3: 7, it is evident that God dispatches prophets initially to caution people prior to any punitive measures. It must be noted, though, that these biblical prophets fulfil these roles as individuals empowered by God's Spirit, rather than as quasi-divine beings who occupy seats within God's council (see Ac 10:26; Ja 5:17).

Additionally, God unequivocally asserts in Isaiah 42:8 that his throne is exclusively his own. This raises the question of the prophets' role in God's council. It is problematic to accept Rukwati's idea of prophets as God's eyes and mind, as God is independent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and does not rely on human beings to serve these functions. Therefore, a significant issue arises in how Rukwati appears to deify Makandiwa, elevating him to a divine status where questioning, criticism, and disagreement are discouraged or deemed unacceptable. The resultant theological curriculum demands that students unquestioningly embrace whatever the prophet, often referred to as "the man of God", teaches and stands for.

Rukwati's portrayal of Makandiwa aligns with the concept of the celebrity cult, as defined by Resane (2017a:4), which involves elevating the "leader to some high status of beauty, achievement, prestige and power". This elevation can be seen as a form of sacralisation of the prophet. Jacobs (2000:114) cautions that when spiritual and social authority is vested in the leader to the extent that they become representatives of a divine being, their will is considered equivalent to God's, and their actions are regarded as beyond reproach.

As a consequence, the resulting theological curriculum does not foster critical faith but instead gives rise to unquestioning Christians who emulate and reflect the personality or character of the prophet in their lives (Resane, 2017a:4). This theological education model, rooted in a celebrity cult, essentially positions the prophet as the embodiment of the theological curriculum. The envisioned approach to discipleship, instead of focusing on Christlikeness, places the prophet's character at the centre of the focus. According to Rukwati (2012:n.p.)

> In these days, the prophetic will take centre stage, so it is therefore important for us to move in the flow of the prophetic. May I challenge you today, by asking you this question, do you have the prophetic mantle upon your life? I suggest you need it. We cannot all be prophets, but we can be sons and daughters of the prophets.

This sacralisation of the prophet provides strong grounds for both the commercialisation of theological education and unaccredited theological qualifications. Accreditation by the government is considered unimportant, but what is of importance is the spiritual stature of the prophet behind the certificate. The prophet behind one's certificate is the accreditation symbol. The value is not placed on the academic credibility of the education provided, but the anointing of the prophetic figure behind the school. Resane (2017a:4) highlights how C. Peter Wagner, who championed the charismatic ecclesiology that he called 'New Apostolic Reformation', viewed theological scholarship as tombstone markers. Likewise, some charismatic preachers have pejoratively referred to theological seminaries as 'theological cemeteries', characterising seminaries as spiritually dead places (Anderson, 2004:2). Resane (2017a:4) mentions that Wagner called for a New Apostolic Reformation curriculum

that emphasises imparting new life, vision, and anointing to students rather than simply providing information. One can agree with the concerns raised by charismatic Pentecostals, such as Wagner, that theological institutions can at times become overly formal and prioritise cerebralism over spiritual faith and the power of God.

Hence, there exists a tendency among Pentecostals to regard their experiential theological framework, centred on charismatic prophetic figures, as superior to the standardised, literature-based knowledge offered in seminaries and universities. It is possible to see a relationship between the privatisation of the Christian faith and the commercialisation of theological education among ANPPs. The privatisation of the Christian faith turns the prophet into a superior leader who operates without accountability to anyone or any authority. As indicated by Resane's reference to Wagner, ANPPs see their non-structured experiential theological systems as the living anointed knowledge of God, not the dead knowledge of people in universities and theological textbooks.

However, there are instances where theological educators in universities do place significant emphasis on academic rigour but may overlook the importance of worship and spiritual disciplines. At times, these theological educators may forget that the primary consumer of theology is the church. It can be argued that in some cases, theological faculties in universities are insensitive to the fears and needs of the church, which forces many Christians in desperate need for theological education to resort to unaccredited institutions.

However, the issue lies in the fact that some charismatics and Pentecostals, such as the ANPPs, at times interpret "impartation" as an uncritical exaltation of experience over truth, which can lead to the elevation of leaders above the church. The problem with the ANPPs lies in their promotion of an esoteric theological system that lacks accountability and resists critique, as questioning it is often viewed as blasphemy since it is sacralised as the holy word of God.

The public nature of theology in countering the privatisation of theological education

The public nature of the Christian faith contradicts the tendency to privatise theology among ANPPs. When we refer to the Christian faith as "public", we mean that, despite its mysterious and spiritual aspects, it is not an esoteric belief confined to private circles. Instead, it is an open proclamation meant for the public world. Authentic Christian theological discourse historically occurred in a public context, responding to various public environments in which Christians lived. This perspective is well articulated by Wells (1993:278):

> The fact that God's truth was transmitted through events external to the individual meant that it was objective, and the fact that it was objective meant, further, that his truth was public. (italics original)

Wells empasises that the revelation of God, while revealed to individuals within their specific life circumstances, ultimately held a broader significance for the public. It was not just a spiritual message; it was a message that challenged the prevailing philosophical structures of the time. It was therefore not something esoteric but public. In this regard, Wells (1993: 278) says, "It was truth for the open market, truth for the nation, truth for other nations". In other words, this truth was intended to be heard and contemplated by both the local community and other nations. Its purpose was to encourage them to re-evaluate their ways and submit to God. Therefore,

> The content of this truth should not be privatized, reduced within private consciousness. Those who are trained by biblical revelation could not follow the path of pagans, who established faith on their experience of nature and their institutions regarding human nature. Their faith was grounded solely in the objective and public nature of God's Word. They stood alone among these ancient cultures, their faith distinctive and unique (Wells, 1993:278).

Wells' main argument is that authentic Christian theology is a public reality. In contrast to some other ancient religions where theological reflection focused on people's experiences of natural elements like the sun or rain, Christian theological reflection centres on God's direct

engagement with humanity. It was an expression of commitment that had public implications. De Gruchy (1994:12) says Christian theology is "an attempt to understand God *from the perspective of discipleship*" (italics original). If theological reflection is an attempt to understand God from the perspective of discipleship, it means that theological education must not be afraid to be accountable to the public, to challenge the public, and to call the public to account to the sovereign God at the centre of theological knowledge. Privatisation represents a way to evade accountability and avoid the responsibility of holding the world accountable to God's truth. While the church may not be subordinate to the public, accreditation "force[s] theological institutions to be accountable to government, the Church and the general public and this could result in greater effectiveness, which is positive" (Naidoo, 2017:3).

Recognising the public nature of theology can free theological education from commodification and commercialisation. These tendencies to commodify and commercialise theological education are manifestations of its privatisation, where theological education is reduced to a product that is owned and sold by the prophets. According to Naidoo (2017:3), "Commodification encourages catering to students, pleasing them by minimising challenges rather than equipping them to persevere in solving complex problems". In essence, the privatisation of theological education can lower the standards of academic rigour. The commodification of theological education among ANPPs often removes students from the demanding and critical public sphere and places them in comfortable private spaces that are less challenging learning environment. Resane (2017a:4) reinforces Warrington's observation that:

> For most of its existence, Pentecostal Theological Colleges have been the venues for short-term preparation for ministry, not places for exploration and contemplation. Studies were not expected to last for longer than 2 years and were often much shorter, the teachers often being successful or experienced ministers or evangelists. Neither has all the teaching been of a high academic calibre nor was intended to provide an opportunity for discourse or analysis.

This approach to theological education communicates a lack of emphasis on challenging and pushing students to reach their full potential, instead

prioritising the awarding of easily acquired degrees. This raises the question posed by Naidoo (2017:3):

> What kind of preparation for life's challenges does an education provide that measures quality primarily by the degree of ease and convenience?

Naidoo's question underscores the idea that commodified and commercialised theological education offers an education that is convenient and easy, but it may not adequately prepare students for the real challenges of ministry and life.

The recognition of the public nature of theological education affirms that theology encompasses reflection on what the Christian church believes. This essentially entails the "intellectual struggle to understand what it means to be a recipient of God's word in this present world" (Wells 1993:99-100). It is the intellectual endeavour to critically assess the authenticity of our theological convictions within the context of the world we inhabit. This recognition highlights the idea that theology is a process of critical reflection and analysis of faith, rooted in the belief that faith encompasses both the cognitive and the experiential. As Noll (1994:46) aptly states, the gospel rightly engages the whole person. It becomes problematic when aspects of our being, such as piety and the intellect, which are meant to complement each other, come into conflict.

Kretzschmar (1997:313) cautions against the dualism that "separates reality into different spheres: the physical and the spiritual; the secular and the sacred; the public and the private; the saving of souls and social involvement". Such dualism encourages personal religious transformation "but the application of religion to social structures is frowned upon" (Kretzschmar, 1997:313). It discourages critical thinking but promotes unquestioning loyalty to leaders. Authentic Christian theology should ensure that our piety is founded on truth and not just good feelings. Simultaneously, it is essential to stress that this critical reflection and analysis must be guided by a sound interpretation and application of Scripture.

Conclusion

The above discussion has attempted to show that while there are indeed unscrupulous elements behind unaccredited and fake theological institutions, it must be noted that many Christians who enrol in those institutions do so out of genuine search for the true knowledge of God. While there are those who are seeking cheap degrees, many Pentecostals, and Christians in general, study in these institutions because they are seeking the 'truth of God' that can be said to be untainted by the worldly philosophies of the world that corrupt true faith. However we may think of these concerns, at the end of the day they place enormous responsibility on accredited theological institutions to do all they can to attract these genuine seekers to register with them and receive an accredited theological education. Accredited institutions are therefore challenged to consider ways of being homely to the seekers of genuine truth, while not compromising their academic standards. Furthermore, there is a sense to which accredited institutions must consider ways of shedding off the perception of being enemies of faith, that exists about them among many Christians.

However, ANPPs are at the same time also challenged to reconsider their perception of theology as a purely private reality between the believer and God that fosters the proliferation of unregulated and unregistered theological qualifications. Because God's message is spoken to the public world, theology is a public reality. The privatisation of theological education should indeed be challenged because it distorts the inherently public nature of the Christian faith. Christianity is a public religion meant to be lived out in the open and often taking on a countercultural role. Therefore, theological reflection must be both sound and public.

The presence of fake theological qualifications, the persistence of unaccredited programmes, and the commodified and commercialised, easy and convenient but low-quality theological education can have a detrimental impact on the integrity of Christian theology. The privatisation of theological education, as evident in its commodification and commercialisation, contributes to this problem, as noted by Naidoo.

> It ruins and is harmful because money and profit run against the foundation of the faith and shows the signs of its growing

> worldliness and of market domination. Thus, it is counterproductive to Christianity, which is built around the aura of sacredness and timeless teachings and preaches against greed and vices rooted in desire, illusion and material madness (Naidoo, 2017:4).

Therefore, ANPPs and all Christians should reject the privatisation of theological reflection and recognise the public nature of theology. This requires an awareness of the complementarity of spirituality and critical theological reflection.

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