

The Intersection of Hedonism and Christian Values: A Theological Lens

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Abstract: This article attends to hedonism as understood through the lens of women who are members of Apostolic Faith Mission Church in Sunnyside, Pretoria, South Africa (AFMS). Utilising purposive sampling, analysis was conducted on fifteen interviews and one focus group using NVIVO software. Findings reflected that while hedonism is widely understood as subject-oriented pleasure, in the Pentecostal church, it was also conceived of as a pursuit which could impose demands on the collective community. Hedonism was also morally critiqued with the result that although some persons pursued it, they ensured to engage it guardedly. This was because of religious injunctions in the Bible as well as the social scrutiny in a religious community. Theoretically, the article adds texture to research which alludes to sexual relations in Pentecostal assemblages by spotlighting hedonism as a central element of theological critiques and social interactions.

Keywords: Hedonism, Pentecostalism, Sexual relationships, AFMS

Introduction

The vibrancy of African Pentecostalism has attracted interest from various quarters since Pentecostalism's expansion after Azusa Street. Some scholars (Kalu, 2009; Wariboko, 2017) have added that Pentecostalism was vibrant even prior to Azusa, pointing to various charismatic expressions on the continent. Over time, the religious expression has been explored broadly via materiality (Benyah, 2020; Burchardt, 2019; Meyer, 2013) especially under the aegis of a wealth and health gospel (Attanasi, 2012; Biri, 2018). In addition to these dimensions has been recognition principally by Birgit Meyer, of the salience of materials and the senses in African Pentecostalism, a feature theorised via 'sensational forms' (Meyer, 2008). While an entire sub-genus has emerged under the wealth and health or prosperity thematic area, scrutiny on the gendered dimension to materialism remains scant. Even more glaring is the gap in scholarship which invokes hedonism as a gendered moral concept among Pentecostals. This theoretical gap is of particular interest given the increased participation of women in the formal labour market, increased literacy levels and wider participation in processes such as migration. The increased involvement translates to increased demands for conveniences, goods and services.

Over time, women are progressively more involved in socio-economic and cultural processes in their own capacity. Moreover, as far as participation in religious convocation is concerned, they are markedly more involved than men, resulting in 'intimate citizenship' to borrow from Parsitau & van Klinken, (2018) in

their work in Kenya. As such, they are firmly embedded in the discourses, dramaturgy and theologies concerning prosperity and sexuality. As social beings, they remain enjoined to various sections of society. Although transforming in some senses, African society remains largely patriarchal and this manifests variably depending on context. One result of the privileging of masculinity is unequal power relations which manifest via objectification of women, relationships based on material interest as well as social pressure to conform to urbane standards. However, while this may play out in broader social settings, Lindhardt (2015) reminds us that within Pentecostal settings, even normative masculinity is subjected to radical change. Building on this perspective as well as scholarship on sex in Pentecostalism (see for example, Burchardt, 2011; Kgalemang, 2014) albeit through women's self-reported conceptions and experiences with hedonism, this paper addresses how women conceive of hedonism and pursuit of materialistic lifestyles. In this paper, I engage hedonism via its interconnected ties to materialism and egoism. However, given that the context is a Pentecostal and charismatic church, my intervention draws out tensions in how Pentecostals perceive, understand and frame pursuit of pleasure and self-interest. I hasten to add that while economic change accounts for some of the moral transformation among women, socio-cultural factors are equally at play as women enjoy increased freedom via Pentecostalism (see for example, Kaunda & John, 2020).

The next section engages hedonism in greater detail,

highlighting the theoretical debates and conceptual intervention made by this paper. A brief sketch of the research methods employed follows before presenting empirical data to clarify the key concept. Conclusions mark the end of the paper.

Conceptualising hedonism

Hedonism's etiology derives from the Greek *hedone* which has evolved in moral philosophy to mean that a good existence should be a pleasurable one. In psychology, it is the theory that the pursuit of pleasure is the primary motivator of human behaviour (Veenhoven, 2003). Additional signifiers of hedonism include pleasure, enjoyment, and delight. Materially it encompasses attainment of a secure lifestyle, sensual gratification for oneself, power, and success with a focus on one's own interests (Schwartz, 1992). The cornerstones of a hedonistic life are enjoyment and pleasure. In this sense hedonists devote their entire existence to sensual pleasures (Ratta et al., 2014). While these perspectives represent widely held conceptions, I wish to draw upon additional layers of scholarship which have complicated the concept and added value to how Greek philosophy and modern thinking approach hedonism.

In contrast to the widely applied conception of hedonism as a pleasure-seeking endeavour, Crisp (2006) conceives of hedonism as wellbeing, a position which is conceptually broader. However, such an expansive framing is problematic for this paper because it moves away from considering hedonism as a feature replete with moral value. This neglect of morality is especially problematic for Pentecostalism, which shares some elements with a Manichean worldview, which reads interactions along two lines: either one is for good or bad, for God or for mammon (Matthew 6:24) or either saved and born again or of the world and so forth. With respect to ethics and morals, one either justifies the worldly and unjust or the spiritually and theologically right. In this sense, hedonism firmly takes root as a pursuit which either satisfies the needs of the flesh or the needs of the spirit. It is from this perspective that hedonism is discussed via sexual relations outside of marriage. In relation to Pentecostalism in some parts of Latin America and Africa, Pype (2014) observes that Pentecostal and Charismatic churches have “penetrated spaces of urban hedonism”, an outcome with material implications for how the city is experienced and

reconfigurations of pleasure. The empirical argument presented suggests that instead of becoming enticed by worldly attractions and seductions, Pentecostal churches are increasingly appropriating spaces which previously hosted hedonic, worldly activities such as night clubs, and turning them into places of religious activity. In this sense, spiritualised hedonic pursuits are undertaken.

To contemplate hedonism, "Theology of the Body" and the teachings of Thomas Aquinas are worth considering. "Theology of the Body," a series of teachings by Pope John Paul II, offers insights into human sexuality, embodiment, and the pursuit of pleasure within the context of Christian morality (John Paul II, 2006; West, 2004). In contrast to a purely hedonistic view of pleasure, this theology emphasizes the inherent dignity of the human person and the integration of physical desires with spiritual values. It is notable that within this framework, pleasure is not necessarily opposed to morality but must be understood and experienced in accordance with biblical injunctions.

In support of these injunctions, Feser (2009) postulates that Thomas Aquinas, a prominent theologian and philosopher, offers a nuanced perspective on pleasure and its relationship to virtue. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas distinguishes between different types of pleasure, including sensory pleasure and intellectual or spiritual pleasure (Aquinas, 2014). He argues that true happiness, or eudaimonia, is found in the pursuit of intellectual and moral virtues rather than mere sensual pleasures. Aquinas also emphasizes the importance of moderation and reason in the pursuit of pleasure, advocating for a balanced approach that avoids excess and vice. This intervention is especially useful for the paper as it draws attention to rationality in hedonic pursuits. That is, people deploy a calculus to their quest for pleasure; it is not a reckless and untinged exercise.

Integrating these theological perspectives into the discussion of hedonism within Pentecostalism adds depth to the analysis by considering how religious traditions shape attitudes towards pleasure and morality. It highlights the tension between worldly desires and spiritual values, as well as the potential for a more nuanced understanding of pleasure that is grounded in theological principles. Additionally, it

provides a broader historical and philosophical context for examining the complexities of human behaviour and ethical decision-making within religious communities.

Philosophically, Roger Crisp (2006) identifies three reasons for a decline in appreciating hedonism: a critique that hedonism was 'a philosophy of swine', thorough examination by GE Moore in *Principia Ethica* and the pushback via "the experience machine." My argument adds a fourth reason which is steeped in a much longer theological tradition and finds expression across various texts of the Bible. In this sense, I set up hedonism as antithetical to Biblical teaching which in turn pits it against the theologies and ideologies of the AFM church. I draw from various excerpts of the Bible to highlight hedonism's debasement. In particular, sexual pleasure is taken as a hedonistic pursuit *par excellence*, discouraged outside of marriage and accepted in it.

Hedonic wellbeing

There is a socio-psychological dimension to hedonic pursuits. In this dimension, hedonists associate contentment with pleasure-seeking behaviour. The term for this is hedonic pleasure. Huta (2015) states that the primary hedonic components of happiness are pleasure, enjoyment, and satisfaction, and comfort, painlessness, and ease. These factors are associated with contents that indicate particular mindsets, such as a focus on the self, the present moment, the tangible, and the taking and devouring of what one needs and desires.

Hedonic Consumerism

With hedonism finding various forms of expression, it is perhaps unsurprising that in contemporary global culture, hedonism is manifest via increased propensity to consume products that are not only essential to survival, but for the sake of accumulation and the satisfaction and conspicuity derived thereof. That is, in addition to satisfying utilitarian needs, individuals with surplus funds can use them to enhance their emotional pleasures and egoistic pursuits. Consumer behaviour theory, identifies this phenomenon as hedonic consumption – a combination of expanding and unequal consumption (Migone, 2007). I argue that this type of consumption can be rooted in a desire to fulfil hedonic pleasures. For example, women may engage in hedonic consumerism in pursuit of attaining higher social statuses so as to target and attract

potential partners of higher social standing. Physical appearance, among women, including in Pentecostalism, is a pervasive preoccupation above spirituality. This might involve grooming, dressing in a way they believe is appealing, or even undergoing cosmetic procedures. This is indicative of a broader societal emphasis on external attributes and reflects internalised cultural ideas but also underscores the complex interplay between religiosity, gender identity, and social expectations within the Pentecostal framework.

Bridging theorisation with empirical work has culminated in some researchers developing a scale for measuring hedonic values as a new instrument for analysing customer behaviour and formulating product strategies (Tarka & Rutkowski, 2015). This scale is referred to as the Hedonic Consumerism Values (HCV) Scale, a multidimensional construct with values for factors such as pleasure. The factors are in turn a part of a larger system of personal values that strongly influence the needs and behaviours of individuals, including their existence, lifestyle, culture, social relationships, and felt feelings and emotions. Although immensely useful in measuring hedonic consumerism, the tool does little to magnify the perceptions held on consumerism itself. As a result, while the extent of consumerism might be measurable, gaps remain around the qualitative dimensions which detail how, why or with what outcomes consumerism is undertaken. Such gaps are especially evident in scholarship framed in religious settings and with particular focus on Pentecostalism.

Methods

The paper draws from a qualitative study which was conducted in Pretoria over a period of 18 months. Relying on data from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions of 15 women participants from the AFM church's Sunnyside branch, the study focuses on broad conceptions drawn from their experiences and observations both at the church and in South Africa's more general social context. In addition to semi-structured interviews, secondary data from AFM documents were relied on to ascertain the organisational perspective on hedonism, materialism and egoism.

Hedonism and the spiritual woman

The following empirical sections and discussions highlight hedonism via sexual pleasure and

accumulation of wealth and possessions. The sections draw on insights from women participants and interlaces their perspectives with the scholarship on hedonism and materialism in Pentecostal Christianity.

Sexual pleasure

Hedonism is here discussed via sexual pleasure which although desirable, is morally and theologically accepted within the confines of marriage. The moral injunctions are clear particularly in Deuteronomy 5:18(NIV), which declares, "you shall not commit adultery" and in Hebrews 13:4(NIV), which states, "let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous". Two probes form the basis of the insights drawn. (i) participant perceptions of today's women's trends concerning sexual relations outside of marriage, and; (ii) The follow-up to this was on what perceptions the women participants held on sexual relations outside of marriage at AFMS.

The pursuit of personal pleasure and satisfaction is recognised among members of AFMS as suggested by Participant 5 in her response to women and sexual pleasure. She states that "it has become a norm that women can live with men even if they are not married. Though at AFMS this practice is not encouraged. It's difficult to generalise on the congregation because those who really are committed avoid being known for such behaviour." Synonymous with her perspective is Participant 10 who indicates that,

The trend on sexual relations outside of marriage is high in today's society. I think it's high because women are not taught the value of sexual relations hence, they think that it is something to do. This leads women to engaging their bodies for money etc. This mentality starts at an early age when children are not taught about the value of their bodies or aren't taught that their bodies are the temple of God and they are meant to be kept pure and holy.

The two ladies, who have both been members of the church for over six years each suggest that sexual relationships outside marriage have become "norms", a perspective which suggests that celibacy and abstinence have become less prominent.

While the above cited participants refer to observations from society in general, Participant 15 draws from her observations as well as personal experience having engaged in pre-marital sexual relations. She suggests that

What I have observed concerning sexual based relations outside marriage is the fact that most women make it a normal thing to happen to have sexual relations outside of marriage. It is like now accepted that our flesh can't just abstain until marriage because whenever people are in a relationship (before marriage), sex must take place because according to the flesh we cannot just ignore. I was also like that but by God's grace I have been celibate 'til now and I am helped by the Holy Spirit.

Participant 15 is a single young lady who identifies in the 18-25-year-old age group. Although the study does not test for an association between demographic profile and hedonic sexual pursuits, it is revealing that most other participants of older age groups and higher educational attainment speak from positions of observation while Participant 15 speaks from observation and experience.

While contributions indicate that some women in general and also those at AFMS have agency over their sexuality and do pursue sexual relations outside of marriage, this is not to suggest that the church is passive about it. Participants indicated awareness of some church interventions around female sexual activity which suggest an attempt at moderation of hedonic pleasure outside of marriage. Contributing on church intervention, one participant notes that

The church does discourage such behaviour especially to the serving members. This usually is addressed in daily sermons. There are other programs for single ladies which I guess women who attend are taught more on sexual relationships. For married couples, I remember attending a seminar which also taught on the matter [Participant 5].

However, while controls and interventions have been variably tried out or instituted, there remain areas of concern. One participant indicates that,

I have a family friend, she doesn't talk,

she does things in secret because she has a child. [...] So, what I would see is I would find used condoms around and I would try to talk to her to ask how are you feeling, what's happening and then she goes to hide but when you hear around they tell you that during the day the father of that house comes to visit her. [...] she would say no i don't do that then when you go there she's cleaning the condoms because she knows I'm coming [Focus Group].

This introduces a layer of complexity on understanding hedonism within the context of religious organisations. There is recognition that hedonism bears a moral dimension. It is understood as morally reprehensible. However, it is wound into the social and cultural fabric of society. That is, the culture of secrecy persists in a setting where openness should prevail. Secrecy is here portrayed even among friends. Associated with the aforementioned complexities is the notion that within the religious context of the study, hedonism is not exclusively a personal affair; rather, it draws the interest albeit passive in some instances, of brethren. A hedonic life would be characterised by pleasure for pleasure's sake for the self. However, at AFMS, in instances where members pursued hedonism, such pursuits meant one's pleasure could affect the well-being of others. Invoking Rogers' (2006) reading of hedonism here, pursuit of pleasure by one individual in church can affect another's pursuit of some spiritual balance. It is therefore not only morally questionable but it also plays a disruptive function in the church community. Lastly, while the church endeavoured to intervene through teachings, these were not always recognised and so the teachings of other churches of a similar type proved instructive. Here, one of the study participants indicated that,

I have not seen or attended seminars or conferences where the church talks about sexual relations outside marriage. I will refer to content from social media from other churches where they freely talk about sex before marriage, in marriage and marital problems in marriage [Participant 14].

Teachings have not always been accessible to some

members such that they fill the gap by tapping into the teachings of other Pentecostal churches. Tapping into the teachings and resources of other Pentecostal churches is not uncommon among Pentecostals as forms of syncretism have been noted in some scholarship particularly via entities such as Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International (Robeck, 2011). Besides sexual intimacy, hedonism was also pursued in the area of material possessions.

Conclusion

Social and economic change have had a bearing on how Pentecostals arrange their lives. As a result, women are a demographic group that has variably been affected. While discussions of women in general suggest their upward social mobility, little has been said about their spirituality in light of the flux. Harnessing hedonism as a concept, the paper has discussed perceptions of women to hedonic pleasure as understood from two standpoints: sexual relations outside of marriage and accumulation of wealth and materials goods. In analysing these pathways, the study notes that while some women pursue sexual relations outside of marriage, they do so in guarded ways to avoid sanction and the critical gaze in the church. In this sense, they rationalize their hedonic pursuits as morally right (Aquinas, 2014). This paper argued that such behaviour contradicts Biblical principles even when done secretly.

The paper has also noted the value of church pedagogy at AFMS which mediates how members approach hedonic lifestyles in their regular lives and in their lives as born-again Christians. Teachings in the form of seminars and conferences as well as informal talks around sexuality, are invaluable platforms through which members learn. However, the platforms do not always prove effective as members pursue their own interests in their private lives. It is here that some engage in sexual practices despite being unmarried.

Others confirm the long-entrenched practice of cohabiting with a partner (Maphosa, 2011), a feature which is prominent among migrant communities.

Where the church teachings were identified as inadequate or invisible, one member indicated that she relied on teachings from other churches. In this manner, she demonstrated the versatility that members had in where they could draw lessons on how to deal with complexities of morality and spirituality. Considered as a whole, the paper

highlights how participants at AFMS drew lessons from one another, were guided by the church and also tapped into pedagogies of other churches, as they navigated their normative and practical Christian values amidst the possibility of hedonic seductions.

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