Pharos Journal of Theology ISSN 2414-3324 online Volume 107 (3) Regular Issue (2026)
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The role of Brueggemann's 'prophetic imagination' in neo-prophetism and South African politics

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https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.3016

Abstract

The relationship between Pentecostalism and politics in South Africa has been studied before, including the role of Pentecostal churches and clergy in the fight against apartheid and the advancement of democracy in the democratic dispensation. What remains under-researched is the role of prophecy within neo-prophetic churches in addressing the contemporary political discourses in the 21st century. To address this research gap, this article uses literature analysis, a qualitative research approach, and Brueggemann's theory of "prophetic imagination". Prophetic imagination argues that prophecy in politics should be able to critique the cultural and political structures in a specific context. The study found that prophetic imagination promises to confront the political powers that often perpetuate oppression and injustices among the poor and the marginalised. Prophetic imagination, as opposed to contemporary practices of prophecy, such as the prophecies of entertainment, materialism, oppression, and political affinity, is appropriate to deal with the current challenges of corruption, maladministration, and crime. In addition, prophetic imagination requires the church to be more critical, rather than conservative and inward-looking. This study makes an important contribution to the intersections of Pentecostalism and politics through the lens of prophetic imagination to examine neo-prophetic churches and the contemporary South African political discourses.

Keywords: Brueggemann, prophetic imagination, neo-prophetism, neo-prophetic churches, politics

Clarification of important terms

Neo-prophetism: refers to the fourth stream of Pentecostalism in South Africa, characterized by one-on-one prophecy, prophetic objects, prophetic deliverance, prophetic titles, and prophetic miracles.
Prophetic imagination: is a theoretical framework coined by Walter Brueggemann that is grounded in God's justice and hope, aimed at challenging oppressive systems within the political system.
Radical criticism: is an approach within prophetic imagination framing that seeks to radically confront the oppressive systems of the empire.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, there has been a massive increase in neo-prophetic movements in South Africa. The neo-prophetic movements have carved out for themselves a convenient religious space in South Africa. One of the reasons for the proliferation of these Christian movements is the passion for the socio-religio-cultural worldviews of the South African people, to bring meaningful and practical solutions to their daily lives. Although the movement has gained much popularity in the public space, though to a moderate degree when compared to traditional churches, little is known about their role in addressing contemporary political scholarship in the 21st century. Thus, the authors of this paper saw it fit to argue for neo-prophetic movements to play a more significant role in confronting contemporary political discourses in the 21st century. In supporting this gap, Ramantswana (2019:7) envisages that the Pentecostal-Charismatic perspective on prophetic ministry differs from the conventional view that links prophecy with the broader ministry of all believers and the sharing of the gospel, as well as the ecumenical church's interpretation, which sees prophetic ministry as playing an essential role in socio-political matters in the pursuit of justice. Prophecy serves as a channel of communication between the church and its congregation, effectively connecting spiritual and political discussions. Nevertheless, it is crucial to exercise caution when utilising prophecy in neo-prophetic churches. Although it can be an influential instrument for tackling current political matters, it is vital to confirm that the prophetic messages are grounded in biblical truth and are not employed to deceive or mislead the public.

The equilibrium between spiritual direction and political engagement is a sensitive issue that neo-prophetic churches must handle with care. Montiel (2000:29) defines politics as the power of the state to govern. Conditionally, politics covers social issues beyond the boundaries of a legitimate state. This article will explore this topic by examining the various associated aspects that will illuminate the researcher's perspective. After this introduction, Pentecostalism and politics in the South African context will be outlined, followed by a discussion of Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* and then a depiction of contemporary practices of prophecy in the South African context. Then, the concept of prophetic imagination in neo-Prophetism is presented, followed by a consideration of the prophetic imagination in contemporary South African politics and, finally, the conclusion.

Methods

This article uses a literature analysis, a qualitative research approach that critically and synthetically analyses the existing literature on a particular subject to identify research gaps in the field (Halperin and Heath, 2012; Fink, 2019; Walliman, 2021). A literature review is conducted to present a compelling argument for the current study, which is grounded in the existing literature and knowledge on the subject. Halperin and Heath (2012:125) explain that "literature review is important in writing a discussion of the existing literature that presents a recapitulation of the researcher's own process of evaluation and critique of it and the process by which the researcher's argument began to take shape." Another important aspect of a literature review is the selection of relevant sources for critical engagement. This is important because a literature analysis, as a research work, cannot engage with all available literature or information. In the first place, the article selected literature on prophetic imagination, particularly the work of Walter Brueggemann (2001), as an authority on the theoretical framework. Other literature was selected by searching key terms such as "neo-prophetism", "neo-prophetic churches", and "South African politics" in Google Scholar. In addition, literature was searched using the combination of both Pentecostalism and politics in the South African context to understand the historical connections between the two. Prophetic imagination was then applied to the neo-prophetic churches and the political landscape in the South African context. Although reference has been made in some sections to the classical Pentecostal churches, this study is limited to the neo-prophetic churches.

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Pentecostalism and politics in the South African context

Throughout history, the interplay between state and religion, particularly regarding the relationship between state and church, has been observed, analysed, and critiqued. However, perceptions of this complex and delicate relationship have evolved, either positively or negatively, over time. During the Middle Ages in Europe, the Christian faith shaped both the function of the state and the role of the church. Religion provided legitimacy to state authorities and power, while the government acted as the guardian of Christian beliefs. In contrast, in contemporary society, religion plays a diminished role; the foundations of society's values are now embedded in democracy and the rule of law. Pentecostalism in South Africa, which began with missionaries such as John G Lake in 1908 and is connected to the Azusa Street Revival, has historically been known to become a vibrant and rapidly expanding religious movement that includes major denominations, such as the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), along with many independent African Instituted Churches (AICs). Now, as these religious movements gain popularity within the country (South Africa), their advocacy emphasises healing, prosperity (prosperity gospel), deliverance, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (such as tongues and prophecy), merging traditional Pentecostal beliefs with African spiritual practices.

Admittedly, Pentecostalism frames its model as providing hope, fostering community, and incorporating contemporary worship styles (including media and music), which resonates with the anxieties of citizens in the post-apartheid era, while also igniting discussions about the commercialisation of faith and its role in social change and transformation. However, under this model, Pentecostalism is seen as resulting from a poor engagement with politics in South Africa, especially in the post-apartheid era, 1994 to date. That said, though, to attend to this old approach of Pentecostalism, Kgatle (2023:1) poses a pertinent question, asking: "What kind of Pentecostal political theology of prophecy is relevant in post-colonial Africa, considering the development in the practice of Pentecostal prophecy?" Importantly, a fundamental presupposition is that there is a need for a mutual relationship between the South African government and Pentecostalism. To have a round table discussion on the question provided by Kgatle, we will prioritise the scholarship of Etukumana (2024), Frahm-Arp (2018), Nel (2024), and Ingaboh (2024) to see if they are able to provide suitable responses to this urgent, daunting question.

Ingaboh's (2024:8) point of departure argues that church and state bodies are both entities that rely on the populace as their primary social resource to fulfil their missions. Although they have distinct, yet interconnected, methods for achieving and maintaining justice for people and the environment, their transformation is feasible. The position that Ingaboh (2024:9) provides is equivalent to saying that, while these organisations cannot be fundamentally changed, both the church and the political system could evolve if the individuals involved choose to adopt new methods in their roles through deliberate biblical truth and teaching. One particular common example is found in the book of Acts 1:6, where we see the community speaking with one voice to raise their concerns about the restoration of the nation of Israel. Clearly, it seems reasonable that this community was searching for a political and earthly kingdom, rather than a spiritual and heavenly one, when they asked their lord if he was going to return the kingdom to the nation of Israel (Etukumana, 2024:3). One voice searching for a political and earthly kingdom implies the growth of that particular community; they were also seeking dialogue and positive answers to gain socio-political stability and sustainable development.

Notably, Nel (2024) makes significant observations regarding the scientific value of the Pentecostal movement's growth within society. Nel (2024) makes the argument that the movement's growth and its impact on social engagement can be valuable through the lived experiences of believers in communities. Nel's (2024:2) criticism, however, is that "Pentecostals do not advocate the reform of social structures by challenging government policies to realise an alternative social reality". Although they have not always been involved in social involvement,

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Nel is convinced that the Pentecostals can become social change agents by addressing pervasive poverty and human rights abuses; thus, influencing the social welfare of their communities. This is made possible by their sober lifestyle and conviction that all people are created in God's image and have equal rights. As a result, Nel (2024:6) asserts that the movement can engage in social justice advocacy in the Global South, where it draws a large number of marginalised and working-class people. Therefore, by challenging oppressive systems and promoting a more just society, Pentecostals can serve a prophetic role.

Speaking up against injustice, defending the rights of the poor and underprivileged, and working to change policies and laws that encourage inequality are some examples of how to do this. This is where the Pentecostals can provide the political sphere with ethics and personnel. Because the teaching of the church feeds the public with moral standards, decorum, and the decency needed in playing balanced politics. This is very important because the church becomes accountable and intentional in its biblical teaching and instructions (Ingaboh, 2024:3). Ingaboh firmly holds that there is a good chance that there are similarities between church and state or politics that, if modified, could be used as instruments in God's work. Since both institutions are solid bodies in society that can be transformed into appropriate tools for God's work, it is assumed that they are reviewed as organs rather than organisations. The transformed human resource dictates institutional reforms. This article focuses on how the Pentecostal tradition interacts with politics and the state to fulfil God's mission. A comparative perspective is therefore appropriate for our work (Ingaboh, 2024:3). If the Pentecostals practised the importance of their social responsibilities, it would have based its societal transformation on it, which would have benefited the community. Many classical Pentecostals in the past have been inward-looking on the issue of social responsibilities, social transformation, and social development (Freeman, 2012; Myers, 2015; Vondey, 2015). When looking at, for example, the neo-prophetic churches, particularly the independent churches with a founder and the leader as young people like Shepherd Bushiri, Alph Lukau, and others, have an opportunity to engage in social transformation, given their affinity to local communities. In addition, these churches have the opportunity to develop society, given their proximity to power or those who hold political offices. However, as it would be discussed in the next section, the challenge is that prophetic ministry in these churches is currently based on entertainment and is very materialistic. Hence, the call to consider a prophetic imagination as a framework to practically engage the powers that be within the political space, rather than being engaged in prophecies of materialism and entertainment.

The above discussion suggests that there should be a permanent unity between the church and the state in South Africa. The reflections' standpoint is that the church has a code of principles that regulates the relations between the church and politics, and between the church and the state. Throughout the centuries, the relationship has been constantly updated and renewed to respond more adequately to various developments in this field. The most authoritative engagement on the question raised by Kgatle comes from Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). The Lumen Gentium (1964, paragraph 1) teaches that the church is an institution, established by Jesus and entrusted to the Apostles and their successors for the salvation of all humanity. Agostoni (1977) responds to Kgatle, raising a fundamental point by stating that the church is a symbol and tool, a "sacrament" of solidarity among all citizens of the state and those in communion with God. Therefore, the church should constantly stand for truth, values, and prophecy, as a tool of unity, justice, peace, and progress, to direct, support, and realise the role of politics, government, and the state. Because the church opposes the "status quo", it is frequently misinterpreted, despised, rejected, and even opposed (Agostoni, 2001).

The church must be a symbol of paradox and paschal mystery, despite the fact that it is frequently accused of meddling in politics and government. The primary point of reference for this rejection is Jesus. The church will occasionally be crucified for standing up for justice, truth, and God's word in the state. Nonetheless, the church should never give in to pressure from the

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political or global community or give up on its core goals of salvation, evangelisation, and revelation in the state. As a result, Pentecostals in South Africa ought to serve in this capacity within the government. This affirms Brueggemann's oppositional reflection on the "royal consciousness". Brueggeman (2001:xxii) asserts: "The royal consciousness leads people to despair about the power to move towards a new life. It is the task of prophetic imagination and ministry to bring the people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God." Brueggemann (2001:xxii) further states that the "royal consciousness" is problematic because of its inherent inequities. Royal consciousness is a life for the privileged that excludes large swaths of the community. The task of the prophetic community is to focus on a promise of newness that is made possible by the power of the Divine."

Brueggemann's prophetic imagination

This article uses Brueggeman's prophetic imagination as a relevant framework for reimagining prophecy in neo-prophetic churches and to confront the oppressive systems within the political space. The Prophetic Imagination explores the profound role of the prophetic voice as reflected in the leadership, actions, and teachings of central figures in biblical narratives, including Moses. Jeremiah and Jesus. As Brueggemann (2001: xxiii) explains in his original preface, this book represents "an attempt to understand what the prophets were up to, if we can be freed from our usual stereotypes of foretellers or social protestors". In doing so, Brueggemann (2001) clearly rejects the two most prevalent interpretations of the prophetic voice among Bible readers, aiming instead for a more profound understanding, often overlooked in discussions of biblical justice. However, this does not dismiss the real-world effects of the messages from the Bible's prophets; instead, it encourages a deeper reaction, thus leading to a more effective response against the forces that sustain injustice and abolish imagination. Starting with the narrative of Moses and his summons to guide his people from bondage and suffering in Egypt, Brueggemann outlines a portrayal of the forces that subjugate all individuals and the struggle to entrench and maintain that power. Brueggemann refers to this as a "royal consciousness", which exists not only among the ruling class but is also imposed upon and required of those it subjugates

In addition to aspiring to be all-encompassing, a component of its mythology is the belief in its inevitability, which aims to eliminate any alternative visions or potentials. Therefore, Moses' appeal to the oppressed was not just about fleeing Egypt and bondage, but to start believing that such liberation could indeed be achievable. Though it may appear less intense than a slave uprising, this represents the broader effort: Moses' "task constitutes nothing short of an attack on the empire's awareness, targeting nothing less than the deconstruction of the empire in its societal behaviours and its mythic claims" (Brueggemann, 2001:9). Brueggemann employs the story of Moses facing the oppressive forces of Egypt to highlight the essential connection between faith and social justice. He critiques both ends: initially, he asserts that social radicalism alone is a "cut flower without nourishment, lacking any sanctions deeper than human courage and goodwill" (Brueggemann, 2001:8). Additionally, he argues that a non-prophetic conservative faith presents a "God of well-being and good order" that can easily transform into "exactly the source of social oppression" (Brueggemann, 2002:8). Brueggemann (2001:8) asserts, "our understanding of God has significant sociological consequences". This is the reason that Moses, Jeremiah, and Jesus would each, in succession, challenge the strongest institutions of their eras.

Jesus was not just a critic of social or political issues. He exhibited the prophetic imagination that earlier Hebrew prophets had indicated. Regardless of the circumstances in which He and many of His listeners existed and endured, He emphasised the emergence of a new and distinct kingdom that was already developing among them. The opulence of Solomon's palace, and his way of life and construction endeavours, such as the Temple, sharply contrast with the oppression, compulsory labour, and destitution of the populace. While mainly appreciated by a select few, the increasing wealth is founded upon and also strengthens political repression, and

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the "static religion" that Moses faced is used to provide a theological rationale for the existing political and economic order. Although grief is essential, Brueggemann (2001:68) compares Jeremiah's lament to the hope declared by Second Isaiah “as a messenger of hope to rulers in distress”. In the sacred text, the prophetic function adapts to the national situation. In the face of assault, exile, and persistent oppression amidst sorrow, hope emerges as the central focus of prophetic imagination. In the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew prophets, this optimistic imagination continually looks ahead to Jesus as the anticipated Messiah. However, when Brueggemann focuses on Jesus, he similarly contends that the ministry of Jesus can be interpreted within the framework of the Hebrew prophets' traditions. He recognises the same sequence of numbness and sorrow, despair and imagination manifested in the ministry, and eventually in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Although Jesus concentrated mainly on the marginalised, with whom He related in numerous ways throughout His life and experiences, “there are never oppressed without oppressors” (Brueggemann 2001:84). Jesus consequently confronted every one of the forces that upheld the political, economic, and religious subjugation of the populace.

Instead of indifference, Jesus demonstrated a compassion that embraced everything and “a profound type of critique, as it declares that pain must be recognized, that pain should not be viewed as typical and inherent, but is an unnatural and intolerable state for humanity” (Brueggemann 2001:88). Jesus was more than just a social or political critic. He displayed the prophetic imagination that the earlier Hebrew prophets had indicated. He emphasised a new and distinct type of kingdom that was already developing among them. His resurrection revitalised the potential for transformative hope. According to Brueggemann (2001:112), “the resurrection can solely be acknowledged, embraced, and rejoiced as God’s new action, whose realm is to generate new possibilities for people and to allow them to experience wonder amid despair”. Although this is fundamentally different, Brueggemann believes it is best grasped within the framework of the promises and aspirations of earlier prophets, describing it as “the ultimate act of prophetic energising” (Brueggemann, 2001:113) that created room for life, renewal, amazement, and potential.

In his *Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann remains attentive to the exercise of prophetic imagination. This is not just an intellectual or spiritual activity. Engaging with the tangible experiences of oppression and numbness, sorrow and despair, hope and vitality, his initiative invites us to envision a different reality and recognises faith communities as hubs of such creativity and empathy: “The prophet’s role is to sustain the art of imagination, continually conjuring and suggesting future options beyond the singular one the ruler promotes as the only conceivable choice” (Brueggemann, 2001: 40). By drawing inspiration from biblical pericopes and Hebrew prophets, as both models and mentors, leaders in these communities are urged to communicate and perform with prophetic imagination. In chapter 49, Brueggemann’s emphasis is on “A Postscript on Practice”, compiling particular instances of what prophetic imagination resembles in modern culture. Essential to genuinely embodying the call to prophetic imagination is the opposition to the prevailing culture, its beliefs, and its assumed inevitability. Prophetic imagination demands that we perceive, experience, and react in unique ways to those around us and the society we live in.

Leaders with prophetic imagination will endeavour to create communities where this imagination is embraced, nurtured, and manifested in ways that transform society and culture. The adoption of the prophetic imagination presents an interpretation of the biblical prophets as individuals who demanded to perceive the potentials of their context in alternative and more truthful ways, contending that this approach is the most comprehensive means of grasping their passionate messages. Like any Christian interpretation of these texts, this interpretation reaches its peak in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, while also offering a context that enhances our understanding of Him and His teachings. The invitation extended to us is to draw lessons from this scriptural legacy and be inspired by it, to embody prophetic imagination in our current context, to envision and develop fresh perspectives and actions, and thereby cultivate an

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environment for life fuelled by the hope, promises, and strength of Jesus' resurrection. Though Brueggemann's prophetic imagination has been praised by some, others have critiqued it for its shortcomings in addressing the contemporary issues facing the church. For example, Cavanaugh (2002) proposed what he calls "theopolitical imagination" as an approach beyond prophetic imagination that directly engages with contemporary issues. Theopolitical imagination has been used and applied by scholars such as Stepheson (2011) on how the church can both be prophetically political and politically prophetic. However, in this article, we focus on prophetic imagination notwithstanding its challenges.

Contemporary practices of prophecy in the South African context

Prophecy in the Old and the New Testament is known as the delivery of the word of God to His people. In this way, a prophet functions more as a messenger in communicating the word of God to his people for a specific purpose; hence, prophecy of judgment, exhortation, restoration, and rebuke. The current practices of prophecy in new prophetic churches are done with the use of media equipment and are broadcast on different social media platforms (Mwale & Chita, 2016; Faimau & Behrens, 2016; Faimau, 2018). Faimau (2018) explains that the media has played an important role in the 21st century in the emergence of the neo-prophetic churches and the popularity thereof. Faimau explains a phenomenon where members of mainline churches would remain staunch members of their churches, but frequently visit the prophetic churches for the purpose of receiving a prophetic word. The use of media has also contributed to how prophecy becomes some form of entertainment, particularly for the young generation in the prophetic churches.

The way some prophets deliver the prophetic word, with the use of humour and polished English, has made the prophetic utterances very popular, in addition to the use of media. The good thing is that these forms of entertainment keep the youth away from drinking alcohol and other activities that do not benefit the youth positively. Writing from a Zambian context, Mwale and Chita (2016:93) make reference to the fact that some taverns and pubs are closed when prophets host their events in Zambia. This, again, contributes to attendance, encouraging the members of mainline churches to attend the prophetic churches, as these kinds of practices are not found in their own churches (Faimau, 2018:369). However, the relevant research question remains: What is the contribution of these prophecies of entertainment to the political discourse in South African politics?

The practices of prophecy in the 21st century somehow perpetuate some form of materialism through the prophecies of opulence and lavish lifestyles. Most prophets in neo-prophetic churches have a propensity to mention material things like cars and houses in their prophecies, rather than challenging the political status quo (Ramantswana & Sebetseli, 2020; Ramantswana & Sebetseli, 2021; Matshobane, 2023). The challenge, therefore, is not necessarily the prophecy itself, but how this kind of prophecy is preoccupied with the prophecies of self-aggrandisement and wealth acquisition, rather than the challenges faced by the people in Africa. Some prophets, like Shepherd Bushiri, Alph Lukau, and others, have the propensity of mentioning their own material things before their congregations, while prophesying to them. Matshobane (2023:250) explains that Bushiri would even charge members to receive prophecies, ranging from R1000 (about 50 US dollars) for ordinary members to R5000 (about 250 US dollars) for the rich members, and R25 000 (about 1250 US dollars) for the very wealthy. This means that the prophecies given to the congregants are driven by the accumulation of wealth and material things by the prophets in neo-prophetic churches in South Africa.

Rather than presenting the gospel holistically, the prophets in these churches become too concerned with the material, rather than the spiritual (Kgatle 2023, Kgatle 2026). This, in a way, demonstrates the love of money that is propagated by the prophecies delivered to the congregants in these churches. In the end, even the congregants become preoccupied with material things, rather than the proclamation of the gospel to the world. This makes the

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members of the neo-prophetic churches mimic their leaders in the pursuit of material things. In the end, materialism becomes the centre of focus in the presentation of prophecies among the prophets in neo-prophetic churches in South Africa.

Prophecy in neo-prophetic churches is also done in a way that humiliates the poor and the marginalised as recipients of prophecies (Ramantswana, 2018; Nel, 2019; Banda, 2021). Whilst the prophets in these churches indeed operate among the poor and the marginalised, the challenge is that in some of the prophecies, they tend to perpetuate the very oppression of the same category of people (Nel, 2019:3). In one prophecy, given by Bushiri to a young woman, the prophet reveals that the woman's fridge is empty and there is only a tomato in the fridge. While the crowd cheered and was surprised that the prophet knew even what was in the fridge, the challenge is that this prophecy is too humiliating to the young woman. Banda (2021:8) points out that publicising the prophecies that are more private leads to the humiliation of the members of these churches. However, many prophets in neo-prophetic churches cannot distinguish between a public prophecy and a private prophecy; hence, the prophecies given to the recipients lead to the humiliation of the members. This means that, sometimes, the prophecies given in neo-prophetic churches are ignorant of the sufferings of those who are on the margins. The prophecies in prophetic churches in South Africa ignore the sufferings and the injustices of the poor and the oppressed (Ramantswana, 2018:4). On the contrary, Ramantswana continues to say:

> The prophets, instead of confronting the oppressive force in society (the government that fails to provide services necessary to overcome the socio-economic challenges), redirect the people to themselves. Consequently, people have no choice but to blame themselves for the social and political ills emanating from a corrupt government.

Therefore, it is correct to point out that the prophecies in these churches are practiced among the poor and the prophets, but do not address the concerns of the poor and the oppressed.

Lastly, in post-colonial Africa, some prophets have become too close to the political figures, which becomes a hindrance to becoming critical voices in the political discourses (Balcomb, 2004; Kuperus, 2011; Resane, 2016). Many prophets, such as Bushiri and Lukau, have become too close to the politicians and frequently invite them to attend their churches. In 2016, the former president, Jacob Zuma, visited Alph Lukau for fellowship and to address the church. Gabela (2023:39) explains that this was not the first time Lukau was associated with the Zumas. In this regard, he mentions the following:

> Pastor Lukau was also on the news when he officiated at former President Jacob Zuma's daughter's wedding, Duduzile Zuma, in 2011. The daughter was getting married to a businessman known as Sonwaba Sambudla. The attention regarding the wedding was because it took place under the guard of both the police and the Presidential Protection Unit. It was also hype, since the bride and her team wore diamond pieces that were estimated to be worth more than R4 million.

Equally, Bushiri has hosted key politicians while he was still operating from the Pretoria showgrounds in South Africa. Most recently, Bushiri has hosted Floyd Shivambu, the former leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters and Umkhonto We Sizwe. As scholars (highlighted above) have pointed out, these visits contribute to the lack of a critical voice to the politicians when they engage in wrongdoing. Balcomb (2004) has long raised the aspect of befriending the politicians as a challenge to becoming critical of the same when it is necessary to do so. This explains the rationale for the silence of the neo-prophetic churches in the years of state capture in the South African context (Kgatle, 2023). This does not mean that politicians cannot attend church and enjoy fellowship with other saints. However, in most cases, politicians do not visit these churches for fellowship but rather to ask for votes and prayers during elections. In the

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end, prophets fail to honestly engage with the politicians about important matters in government. This calls for a different approach to prophecy in neo-prophetic churches in the South African context.

Prophetic imagination in neo-prophetism and South African politics

Prophetic imagination is a call to stand with the oppressed in the South African context. This means that prophets in neo-prophetic churches need not stand with the empire in perpetuating oppression, but rather stand with those who are on the margins. This means that prophecy should be able to deal with the plight of the poor and the marginalised in society. In what Brueggemann (2001) describes as the "prophetic energising", there is hope for the hopeless in the delivery of the prophetic word. In other words, prophecy is not meant to discourage the people further, but to offer them more hope. This brings a connection between prophetic imagination and the theology of hope, as suggested by Brueggemann. Brueggemman (2001:14) says that hope is not given by that which already exists, but rather by the hope of the future. Therefore, prophets, such as Bushiri and Lukau, are called upon to give hope to their congregants by pointing them to their bright future, rather than the misery of the present moment.

Prophetic imagination, therefore, is an approach to prophecy that not only concentrates on the present situation but also on the future. Therefore, prophecy cannot condemn the recipients, but grants them hope that things will become better. This is important, considering the poor and those who live on the margins require such an energising proposal, as suggested by Brueggemann (2001). In the end, even the hopeless will have more hope as a result of receiving the prophetic word in the broader context of prophetic imagination. This is important in a world where people are facing all kinds of challenges and atrocities; the prophetic word gives them hope in the midst of socio-economic and socio-political challenges.

In embracing the prophetic imagination, prophets in neo-prophetic churches can become a critical voice rather than having an affinity with the politicians. Prophetic imagination is relevant for neo-prophetism and the political discourse because of its ability to withstand popular imaginations. Brueggemann (2001:9) has outlined prophetic imagination as a framework for the radical criticism of those who are in power. This means that, by embracing prophetic imagination, prophets in neo-prophetic churches would be able to speak against the power mongers in the South African context. Through this radical imagination, the powers that be cannot continue to be oppressive to those on the margins.

Brueggemann (2001) is hopeful that, in becoming very radical, the prophetic voice can then replace the oppressive voices in society through humility and simplicity. In the radical criticism of prophetic imagination, the injustices taking place in society are replaced by calls to become a just and inclusive world. Brueggemann (2001) is cognisant of the fact that each time the people of God require liberty from slavery and any form of oppression, a form of radical approach is required to deliver them. It is for the same reason that, in the South African context, a radical critical approach to politics is needed in advocating for the liberty of the oppressed. The argument made in this current study is that, in the quest to become critical, the prophets cannot maintain their affinity to the politicians, as this compromises their radical voices. This does not necessarily refer to enmity with the politicians, but the ability to become critical when the need arises in the political discourse.

Brueggemann (2001) is also of the view that prophetic imagination can produce an alternative community that is not always driven by material things and elitism. This alternative community would, therefore, be an inclusive community that includes both the poor and the rich within the context of prophetic imagination. This is important in ensuring that the ministry of prophecy is not a quest to accumulate material things, but to bring equality in the world. In addition, Brueggemann (2001) presents a prophetic imagination as a framework that confronts dominant

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culture and narrative, particularly when such bring oppression to the people. In this way, the role of the prophetic ministry is not to entertain the recipients but rather to confront dominant cultures that perpetuate oppression. For Brueggemann (2001:101), when the dominant cultures are confronted, there will be an emergence of the new beginning and new realities among the people that prepare them for the new and favourable experiences. Because for the communities to experience the new, the old order needs to be created that allows for an alternative community, as proposed by Brueggemann. The post-colonial African realities require this kind of an alternative community that can create a new environment for the people, given the many challenges that society faces in the 21st century. Therefore, prophets in neo-prophetic churches cannot continue to engage in prophecies of entertainment, oppression, materialism, and political affinity, but rather in the prophetic imagination that calls for an alternative community. This is even more relevant in the South African context, as there are so many challenges facing society that require renewal, hence the importance of prophetic imagination in bringing such a renewal. New prophetic churches should not compromise their prophetic message, given the affinity to the political space, but rather become confrontational to the oppressive systems of the empire as per the framework of prophetic imagination and radical criticism.

Conclusion

This article explored the intersection of Pentecostalism and politics in the South African context in the form of a literature review in qualitative research. The article looked at the prophetic imagination, a framework that was developed by Brueggemann, and its contribution to the theology and practice of prophecy in neo-prophetic churches. The main objective of the article is that prophetic imagination is relevant in articulating prophecy in politics as a mechanism to critique the cultural and political structures in a specific context. This objective was informed by the practices of prophecy in prophetic churches, which are currently insufficient in responding to the socio-political challenges in the South African context. The current practices of prophecy in these churches, including but not limited to prophecies of entertainment, prophecies of materialism, and prophecies of oppression, were outlined and discussed in detail.

The study found that prophetic imagination promises to confront the political powers that often perpetuate oppression and injustices among the poor and the marginalised. Prophetic imagination, as opposed to the contemporary practices of prophecy, is relevant to dealing with the current challenges of corruption, maladministration, and crime. Prophetic imagination, as a critical and confrontational approach to prophecy, is helpful, as opposed to the inward-looking approach in neo-prophetic churches and other Pentecostal churches. This study makes an important contribution to the intersections of Pentecostalism and politics through prophetic imagination in neo-prophetic churches and the contemporary South African political discourses. The study challenges the conservative approach to contextual politics by using the prophetic imagination of the critical and confrontational mandate of prophecy.

The article makes a constructive theological proposal, namely, that Brueggemann's framework offers a corrective to entertainment-driven, highly materialistic, and politically compromised forms of prophecy in neo-prophetic churches. The growth of neo-prophetic churches in South Africa and also the political imbroglio of some prophets, and of course, the need for critical theological frameworks, are all unrelenting issues in present-day African theology and political theology. However, this study was only contextualised within neo-prophetic churches and could not look at other streams of Pentecostalism in the South African context.

Future studies can use prophetic imagination to address the various political challenges found in the intersection of Pentecostalism and politics in various contexts. These studies can look at the intersection of Pentecostalism and politics in other streams, including classical Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism, and charismatic renewals.

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