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The CRL Rights Commission's view on followers of controversial prophets in South Africa

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This article employs the utilitarian view of religion in African traditional religions (ATRs) to critically evaluate the South African Commission for the Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic (CRL) Communities' characterisation of adherents of controversial and abusive religious systems in South Africa as gullible and vulnerable. The article addresses the following question: *How does the characterisation of followers of controversial faith healers as gullible and vulnerable appear when individuals' adherence to questionable religious practitioners is analysed from a utilitarian perspective?* The utilitarian perspective views religion as a tool for attaining certain outcomes. This perspective is derived from ATRs, which treat religion functionally rather than ontologically. The secondary question is: *How should the South African church address this utilitarian perspective in order to protect Christian believers from gullibility and vulnerability?* The article contends that the characterisation of followers of controversial religious leaders as gullible and vulnerable misleadingly ignores the utilitarian nature of religion in Africa, which prioritises 'what works' over 'what is true'. It is therefore argued that the solution to ensuring safe religious practices in South Africa does not lie in regulation by state bodies such as the CRL Rights Commission, but rather in the churches' recovery of the ontological view of religion, which prioritises 'truth' over 'utility'.

Contribution: The article seeks to offer a critical perspective on theological engagement with the CRL Rights Commission's call for the regulation of religion in South Africa, as well as the apparent prevalence of gullibility and vulnerability among Christians who acquiesce to abusive and controversial religious leaders who have recently gained significant influence in the country and the region.

Keywords: gullibility; vulnerability; utilitarianism; ontological; CRL Rights Commission; abuse.

Introduction

A previous article examined the implications of the recommendations of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) to regulate religion in South Africa, on the Commission's understanding of religion (Banda 2019). This article adds to the previous article by employing the conceptual framework of 'religious utilitarianism' to analyse the Commission's perception of followers of controversial church leaders in South Africa as gullible and vulnerable, and therefore requiring state protection through the regulation of religion. Religious utilitarianism is employed as the main theoretical framework of analysis because it challenges the scientific rationalistic and ontological framework of religion employed by the CRL Rights Commission, which treats religion in largely objective terms (CRL Rights Commission 2017:39–47). However, to many Africans, religion is not an objective ontological reality but a mystically pragmatic reality that functions as a tool for managing life (Mbiti 1970:2). The scientific, rationalistic and ontological view of religion treats religion as a quantifiable reality that must meet evidence-based objective scrutiny, yet many Africans approach religion subjectively as an instrument of managing the complexities of their existence. Because the subjective approach to religion is essentially utilitarian, it prioritises outcomes over the substantive essence of faith. The utilitarian approach often legitimises practices that may appear irrational or credulous, as long as they lead to the accumulation of spiritual power, resulting in victorious living.

The primary method employed in the article is a Christian theological–analytical approach, which utilises the lens of utilitarian or instrumentalised religion to interrogate, evaluate and critique the

CRL Rights Commission's categorisation of followers of controversial church leaders in South Africa as gullible and vulnerable. The context of this analysis is the prevailing African approach to religion, which tends to be pragmatic rather than doctrinal (Kroesbergen 2019:2; Mbiti 1970:119). Religious utilitarianism adopts a pragmatic approach, considering religion primarily as a means for worshippers to achieve desired outcomes, with minimal attention given to doctrinal accuracy or moral integrity. The central question addressed in this article is: *How does the characterisation of followers of controversial faith healers as gullible and vulnerable appear when individuals' adherence to questionable religious practitioners is examined from a utilitarian perspective?* This leads to the secondary question: *How should the South African church address this utilitarian perspective in order to protect Christian believers from gullibility and vulnerability?*

In this article, *gullibility* and *vulnerability* are interpreted as conditions of intellectual and spiritual naivety arising from a lack of critical thinking and spiritual discernment. These conditions may render church members susceptible to persuasion and deception through manipulative religious teachings and promises that could endanger their well-being. Such gullibility and vulnerability predispose church members to uncritical belief and may make them more easily manipulated by unscrupulous church leaders who exploit religion for personal gain.

By *controversial church leaders*, the article refers to questionable church leaders, many of whom claim to be prophets and pastors endowed with a special anointing from God to perform miracles and wonders. They are described as controversial church leaders because their church practices, as will be illustrated below, are questionable and are not in line with orthodox conventional Christian practices. For example, instead of the conventional practice of anointing a person being prayed for with oil on the forehead, a controversial church leader sprayed with a household insecticide on their faces. Likewise, some controversial prophets violated Christian sexual ethics by prescribing lewd acts to people seeking God's blessings. Reports of unusual religious practices in some of these churches have prompted critics to characterise followers as gullible and vulnerable. These practices include instructing congregants to eat grass, demanding large sums of money from individuals seeking healing or material blessings, and claiming the power to heal human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) (CRL Rights Commission 2017:6; Khanyile 2023:102). In some reported cases, certain leaders have prescribed forms of 'healing' and exorcism for women that involve sexual relations with the prophet (Agazue 2016; Kgatle 2021:91–112; Resane 2017). The controversial church leaders form the majority of those summoned to appear before the CRL Rights Commission in 2015–2016 to answer allegations concerning the abuse of religion and the commercialisation of people's religious beliefs. According to some scholars, these church leaders operate in cult-like ways by establishing religious systems centred on their own personalities (Kgatle 2021:vi–vii, 3–4). These and many other acts, numerous to mention, are described as controversial because they are recognised by many people, both within and outside the church, as breaking conventional Christian norms and practices.

The term *church* is used collectively to refer to the universal community of Christian believers in South Africa. The church in South Africa is therefore challenged to take urgent and serious measures to protect itself against utilitarian, cultic and abusive practices that pose a danger to society, soil its Christian testimony – all of which ultimately open the church to regulation by state authorities such as the CRL Rights Commission (Banda 2020).

The CRL Rights Commission's concerns about abusive religious practices in South African churches

In accordance with the South African law, the CRL Rights Commission is designated as a Chapter 9 institution because it is established under Chapter 9 of the national Constitution (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996: Section 181 [1][c] & [2]). As a Chapter 9 institution, CRL Rights Commission functions as an independent state entity to strengthen democracy by monitoring cultural, linguistic and religious matters within the republic (RSA 1996: Sections 181–194). The principal mandate of the CRL Rights Commission is to promote and protect the religious, cultural and linguistic rights of minorities, and to ensure that all citizens in South Africa enjoy these rights equally. The CRL Rights Commission (2017) has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the widespread abuse of belief systems and the commercialisation of religion in South Africa. In its 2017 investigative study on the commercialisation of religion and abuse of people's belief systems, the Commission characterised the followers of such church leaders as gullible and vulnerable (CRL Rights Commission 2017). The Commission therefore advocated for the regulation of religion to prevent questionable church leaders from exploiting desperate and naïve citizens seeking divine solutions to their personal problems.

One of the Commission's primary concerns is to understand why individuals submit themselves to church leaders and religious systems that subject them to dehumanising, financially exploitative and physically harmful practices. Among its various inquiries into the abuse and commercialisation of religion in South Africa are two significant investigative reports: the Report of the Hearings on the Commercialisation of Religion and Abuse of People (CRL Rights Commission 2017) and An Investigative Study of the Commercialisation of Religion in the RSA: 2016 Gauteng Pilot Study (Kibuuka, Van Aardt & Tustin 2016).

This article, however, draws primarily on the 2017 report because it reflects the views and positions explicitly expressed by the members of the CRL Rights Commission, particularly

its two-time chairperson, Ms Thoko Mkhwanazi-Xaluva. By contrast, the report by Kibuuka and colleagues was prepared by consultants for the Commission and focuses specifically on the commercialisation of religion in South Africa. The 2017 report is based on the Commission's in-person interviews and interactions with a wide range of church leaders and their followers. A substantial proportion of the church leaders who appeared before the Commission were affiliated with new Pentecostal prophetic churches (CRL Rights Commission 2017:53–56).

As stated in the report, the primary aim of the CRL Rights Commission (2017:9) when conducting its investigative study was to establish 'why people allow such [*abusive and humiliating*] practices and what causes people to believe these, to the extent of *inexplicable gullibility*'. In another section of the report, the Commission expands the focus from gullibility to include *vulnerability*, stating that the objective of its investigative inquiry was to 'understand the deep societal thinking that makes some members of our society *vulnerable and gullible* on views expressed and actions during religious ceremonies' (CRL Rights Commission 2017:6).

In other words, the Commission is concerned with why church members appear to accept and comply, often without question, with disturbing instructions issued by their pastors or prophets during church services or religious ceremonies. Public media reports have frequently highlighted incidents in which congregants were instructed by pastors to eat grass, spraying household pesticides on their faces, among other alarming practices. There have also been accounts of pastors and prophets touching women in sexually inappropriate ways and demanding large sums of money and property in exchange for blessings from God or healing, among other such incidents. The Commission therefore sought to understand why individuals would subject themselves to such degrading, humiliating and dehumanising acts at the behest of their prophets and pastors.

The Commission's use of terms such as 'inexplicable gullibility' and 'vulnerability' strongly depicted the followers of controversial church leaders as extremely naïve, impressionable and lacking discernment. To some extent, this language suggests a level of credulity that warrants protective intervention by the state against abusive religious leaders. Mashau (2021) expresses a similar perspective, stating:

> Through all these reports and alleged forms of the exploitation of the public we do have to recognise that these malpractices can only find material expression due to the gullibility of different South African publics. (p. 373)

He adds:

> Gullible members of our publics – often due to their own experiences of hopelessness and discontent – succumb to the empty promises and practices of charlatan 'pastors' and 'prophets'. Some of these prophets seem to be doing so blindly, because they are, in the biblical expression, 'sheep without a shepherd'. From within their hopelessness, people follow, believe, and pay these religious leaders, as if they are caught under their spell, or even as being hypnotized. (Mashau 2021:373)

These sentiments portray followers of controversial prophets as in danger and in urgent need of rescue. Indeed, there is little doubt that 'these practices require serious scrutiny and reasonable analysis and sensitive discernment' (Mashau 2021:374). In both of its reports – the one produced by the Commission and the other prepared by Kibuuka et al. – the Commission strongly recommended regulating religion in South Africa as a means of protecting the gullible and vulnerable public from abuse by church leaders (Kibuuka et al. 2016:126–127).

The CRL Rights Commission's secularised perception of religion

The central contention of this article is that the call by the CRL Rights Commission and other like-minded bodies for the regulation of religion is largely informed by a top-down rationalist, secularist and humanist perspective that prioritises human rights and the professionalisation of religious leadership (Banda 2019:8). From this perspective, religion as a whole and not just Christianity is approached as a rational and objective phenomenon, and the authenticity of religious expressions is often evaluated according to the standards of rational logic. In doing so, however, this approach tends to overlook the irrational spiritual dynamism present in many religious traditions, as well as the radical demands that believers may perceive as being placed upon them by God (Banda 2019:8–9).

While religious people can indeed be gullible and vulnerable, the Commission does not appear to be sufficiently informed by the spiritual dynamism of religion among African Christians, most of whom tend to hold a utilitarian rather than an ontological view of religion (Kroesbergen 2019). A central concern of this article is that the CRL Rights Commission makes recommendations on the regulation of religion without adequately considering the utilitarian understanding that characterises many African contexts. In such settings, religion is often evaluated not in terms of objective truth but in terms of its practical value and capacity to help individuals secure the necessities and fulfil aspirations of everyday life (Niebuhr 1946).

As scholars such as John Mbiti (1970:6) and Hermen Kroesbergen (2019:6) demonstrate, religion in Africa, including Christianity, is often less concerned with doctrinal or theological content than with its functional role in enabling adherents to connect with the life-giving spiritual realm. In many African contexts, what attracts followers to a particular religion or religious leader is not primarily the theological content they profess, but rather the perceived mystical qualities of the leader: the signs and wonders they perform, the spiritual power they are believed to possess and their capacity to mediate access to the spiritual realm.

In cases where religious leaders are valued for their teachings, these teachings frequently do not confront sin directly but instead take the form of motivational and uplifting messages

that offer practical wisdom considered to have immediate relevance for everyday life (Kgatle 2021:143–144; Kroesbergen 2019:6). Consequently, much of the preaching of popular African Pentecostal prophets tends to be motivational and utilitarian rather than doctrinal in nature. This suggests that religious systems in Africa often thrive less on the orthodoxy of their dogmas than on their perceived ability to meet people's needs.

Likewise, church leaders are seldom chosen on the basis of the coherence of their theological systems; rather, they are valued for their functional role in mediating divine power to followers, enabling their lives to flourish or, at the very least, to remain manageable (Frahm-Arp 2021:6; Kroesbergen 2019:6).

Interestingly, one of the weaknesses of the CRL Rights Commission's characterisation of the followers of controversial faith healers as 'inexplicably gullible' and 'vulnerable' is that its investigatory studies do not appear to have moved beyond interviews with church leaders and followers themselves regarding why they display such high levels of 'gullibility' and 'vulnerability' and submit to questionable religious leaders. Deeper analysis is instead provided by scholars such as the South African anthropologist Van Wyk (2019:n.p.), who cautions against the tendency to portray followers of African Neo-Pentecostal prophets as 'captive victims'. While acknowledging that many members of these churches are economically disadvantaged and often depend on government social grants, Van Wyk observes that their congregations also include 'significant numbers of professionals, business people and increasingly, politicians' (Van Wyk 2019). This suggests that followers cannot simply be characterised as intellectually or socially gullible and vulnerable, as many are educated professionals occupying responsible positions across different sectors of society.

Van Wyk further highlights the utilitarian logic underpinning neo-Pentecostal prophetism by noting that many individuals attend these churches after consciously deciding which prophet to follow (and which to avoid), based on their personal needs and their search for more efficacious 'technologies' and 'stronger prophets' (Van Wyk 2019). This phenomenon is widespread across Africa, where people frequently move intentionally from one prophet to another in search of spiritual power to address needs often perceived as having spiritual causes. These dynamics indicate that, rather than focusing solely on the presumed gullibility and vulnerability of followers, greater attention should also be given to the functional and utilitarian character of religion in many African contexts.

The African context of utilitarianism and the practices of controversial church leaders

A criticism that can be levelled against the CRL Rights Commission's secularistic characterisation of followers of abusive and controversial neo-prophetic movements as gullible and vulnerable is that, as noted in the foregoing section, it does not adequately take into account the utilitarian approach to religion prevalent in many African societies, where religion is often valued for its function rather than for the doctrinal coherence of its beliefs. Instead of relying solely on a secularised analysis of religion, authorities such as the CRL Rights Commission, as well as others concerned about unsafe religious practices in society, should also employ a religious analysis that takes seriously how religion functions within African contexts.

One important factor that must be considered is that for many Africans religion is approached primarily in utilitarian rather than ontological terms. In other words, the significance of religion lies less in adherence to a body of doctrines and more in its capacity to make life better and more manageable. This perspective is evident in the way many African religious movements that have emerged from or broken away from conservative forms of Christianity tend to prioritise functional and existential concerns over strictly theological or doctrinal elements.

Mbiti (1970) supports the argument advanced in the foregoing discussion regarding the utilitarian understanding of religion in African traditional religions (ATRs) when he observes:

> [*F*]aith is utilitarian, not purely spiritual; it is practical and not mystical. The people respond to God in and because of particular circumstances, especially in times of need. Then they seek to obtain what He gives, be that material or spiritual; they do not search for Him as the final reward or satisfaction of the human soul or spirit. (p. 87)

Therefore, before categorising followers of controversial and abusive church leaders as gullible and vulnerable, it is important first to consider the dominant understanding of religion across much of Africa, which is deeply informed by ATRs and permeates people's entire existence (Banda 2025: 2–3). Crucially, within ATR, religion is largely utilitarian rather than ontological. It is pursued primarily as a means of achieving a better quality of life and addressing existential needs, rather than as a system concerned primarily with doctrinal truth.

An insightful definition of *religious utilitarianism* is provided by Niebuhr (1946:3) who describes it as treating 'truth [*a*]s a pragmatic device by means of which men [*sic*] are enabled to gain satisfactions as biological and temporal rather than as rational and eternal beings'. In this understanding, value is placed on the immediate and practical benefits of religion rather than on its eternal or spiritual dimensions. Niebuhr formulated this definition in the context of his critique of the instrumentalisation of the Christian gospel by American conservative Christians after the Second World War, when it was employed as a tool to counter the spread of Communism in the Western world (Niebuhr 1946:3). In that context, the Christian gospel was utilised as a tool for political objectives rather than to guide individuals into an unconditional relationship with God. The use of religion for material ends is

a significant feature of ATRs and much of African Christianity, where functionality often takes precedence over doctrinal accuracy, and religion is pursued for pragmatic rather than ontological purposes.

Utilitarianism forms the foundation of African cosmology, which perceives the universe as a unified whole divided into two interconnected and interdependent spheres: the spiritual and the material. Religion serves as humanity's instrument for maintaining and preserving the unity between these two realms. Kunhiyop (2012:xvi) highlights the utilitarian approach to religion in African societies, stating: '[F]or Africans there is an intimate balance between the abstract and the practical. Purely abstract thinking is regarded as irrelevant'. In essence, Africans are not interested in a religion that offers only abstract or intellectual concepts, but rather seek a religion that addresses their immediate existential needs (Maimela 1991:9; Mbiti 1970:305; Tutu 2023:viii). However, this should not be interpreted as suggesting that Africans lack the capacity for abstract thought, as implied by Placide Tempels (1959). As Kunhiyop (2012:xvi) argues, all humans are capable of abstract thinking. Instead, for most Africans, 'abstract thinking should be situated in concrete reality and should be productive and relevant'.

The notion that abstract thinking should be grounded in concrete reality and serve individuals' existential contexts reflects the utilitarian value of religion. It suggests that the significance of religion lies in addressing people's immediate concerns, rather than in pursuing abstract objective knowledge or deferring the benefits of religious salvation to the afterlife.

This utilitarian or functional perspective on religion constitutes a central aspect of many ATRs, where notions of truth and reality are grounded in functionality rather than 'truth-claims' (Kroesbergen 2019:2). Amoah and Bennett (2008:12) build on Menski's insight that ATRs are defined by 'right action, not right belief – orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy'. Within ATRs, religious utilitarianism is evident in the way 'God is not pictured in an ethical-spiritual relationship with [*hum*]an[*ity*]'s acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical' (Mbiti 1970:6). The utilitarian dimension is also apparent in the anthropocentric nature of worship. Addressing this human-centredness of African religiosity, Mbiti (1970) states:

> African ontology is basically anthropocentric: man is at the very centre of existence, and African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance: It is as if God exists for the sake of man [*sic*]. (p. 119)

Therefore, in ATRs, emphasis is placed on developing practical know-how rather than adhering to doctrinal logic. Consequently, in these traditions, 'it is not truth-claims that are disputed, but whether it works' (Kroesbergen 2019:2). This pragmatic approach to religion is fundamental, or at least influential, in shaping how many African Pentecostals – and African Christians more broadly – perceive and engage with new prophetic figures who claim the power to bring about physical health and material prosperity. As will be discussed below, African Neo-Prophetism represents a utilitarian form of faith that operates in a manner described by Chirevo as 'deal-making' (Banda 2025; Browning 2013). This suggests that, rather than viewing followers of controversial and abusive neo-Prophets as merely gullible or vulnerable, they should essentially be understood as dealmakers – individuals who utilise religion as a means to achieve their material and temporal objectives.

Religious utilitarianism among controversial religious leaders

This section elaborates on how the faith healers approach religion in a utilitarian manner.

Religion that prioritises power over doctrinal matters

Religious utilitarianism among controversial church leaders is evident in the promotion of a form of religion that prioritises power over doctrinal concerns. This approach values pragmatism above truth. The emphasis on functionality rather than doctrinal integrity is reflected in how these prophets highlight their spiritual power to perform wonders and to miraculously provide for people's material needs. Their ministerial focus is not on ontological issues, such as doctrinal questions regarding the nature of God, the condition of believers or the eschatological hope of the resurrection of the saints, but rather on what religion can deliver for individuals in this present life (Niebuhr 1946:3).

Therefore, it can be argued that a sense of gullibility and vulnerability persists among followers of controversial church leaders, owing to a miracle-driven religious culture that is uncritically captivated by the prophets' spectacular miraculous acts rather than the integrity of their doctrinal teachings (Kroesbergen 2019:5–9). The religious environments cultivated by these leaders are centred on the pursuit of miracles, where greater emphasis is placed on miracles, signs and wonders than on doctrinal instruction. This tendency is reflected in the popular names of prophetic ministries, which appear to prioritise extraordinary miracles over ethical conduct and a proper relationship with God. Ministry names such as Prophet Shepherd Bushiri's *Enlightened Christian Gathering* and Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng's *Incredible Happenings Ministry* convey a strong association with the miraculous, elevating the prophets' roles and abilities above their character.

Religion centred on powerful men of God

Directly linked to the propagation of a religion that prioritises power over doctrine is a form of religion driven by and centred on powerful male figures. Although there are charismatic women who claim to be prophets and faith healers (Kgatle 2021:97), they are fewer in number and

generally attract less controversy than their male counterparts. Consequently, the faith-healing movement is predominantly masculine in both nature and appearance. This dynamic also accounts for the high levels of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and young girls by some faith healers (Agazue 2016; Kgatle 2021:91–112; Kgatle & Frahm-Arp 2022:3; Khanyile 2023:99).

The form of religion characterised by powerful men of God who prioritise spiritual power over doctrinal integrity draws on the ATR worldview of *kukhwima*, a chiChewa term denoting the acquisition of significant spiritual power through magical means, elevating an individual to a position of fear and reverence among others. This concept is known as *ukutshwama* in isiNdebele and *kuromba* in ChiShona. Kalu (2008:103–122) describes how certain Pentecostal pastors adopt distinctive spiritual titles, such as the 'big man of God', to present themselves as exceptionally anointed individuals capable of performing superior miracles. Controversial church leaders further sanctify their own authority by adopting uniquely authoritative spiritual titles such as Major One, Seer One, Papa and Comforter, among others (Agazue 2016:2; Gunda & Machingura 2013; Kgatle 2021, 2022a).

In various forms, prophets such as Bushiri (2019), Nala (2022), Mboro (Jacaranda 2016), and Angel (2013) have all claimed to have had direct personal encounters with God, distinguishing themselves as unique and supremely authoritative among other Christians, and even presenting themselves as spiritually superior to other prophets. Moreover, these assertions of personal encounters with the divine are intended to secure unquestioned and absolute trust and obedience from their followers. The titles and claims associated with such figures wield significant influence, inspiring profound awe among many uncritical adherents. Consequently, these believers feel compelled to obey their words without question. The promotion of utilitarian religiosity fosters a personality cult that ultimately leads to the idolisation of the prophets (Kgatle 2019:3).

Many Christian new Pentecostal prophets employ claims of close association with God, particularly the Holy Spirit, to present themselves as superior to ATR spiritual practitioners and prophets from African Independent Churches, whom they categorise as operating through demons and evil spirits. Kalu (2008:113–114) notes that when Pentecostal prosperity pastors emerged in the 1980s, they appropriated the local ATR image and idiom of the 'big man', who was no longer suspected of malevolence but retained his traditional status. Unlike the 'big man' in the local context, who was often viewed with suspicion and believed to engage in witchcraft and sorcery, the pastors and prophets are portrayed as individuals anointed by God for leadership.

Many individuals have greater confidence in pastors and prophets than in traditional specialists, who are often perceived as utilising obscure powers associated with darkness. In contrast, Pentecostal prophets are believed to operate through the pure power of the Holy Spirit. As noted by Kalu (2008):

> A chorus proclaims that 'God has rubbed oil on me, that is why I am gleaming with anointing'. As God was praised, so was His visible viceroy on earth. The image and idiom of the pastor as a superhero was derived and translated from the indigenous language and perception of the hero as someone who was chosen and anointed by the gods. The pastor replaced the witch doctor. (p. 114)

The Pentecostal prophets are regarded as trustworthy because they are perceived as pure men of God who operate through the Holy Spirit rather than through powers of darkness. Consequently, people are inclined to place their trust in these leaders, accepting their actions, words and demands. Nevertheless, some of these Christian leaders take advantage of their reputation as righteous men of God to exploit their followers, often replicating the abuses seen among their non-Pentecostal counterparts, and frequently on a much larger scale because of the considerable size of their congregations.

Divine figures who provide better religious systems

Like the spread of religions centred on influential spiritual leaders, certain controversial religious movements present themselves as divine entities with the authority to supplant conventional religious systems. Some prophetic figures who appeared before the CRL Rights Commission to address allegations of exploiting religion and manipulating belief systems asserted that they possessed a degree of divinity. For instance, the seven Mancobo brothers, leaders of a church known as The *Seven Angels Ministry* in South Africa's Eastern Cape province (*Radio 702* 2018), claimed to be angels sent from heaven. Through their leader and spokesperson, they articulated their self-perception using the following sacred terms:

> The seven of us here are angels from the heavens … We came from Jehovah … I am not a pastor … I am an angel from heaven … I sit at the right had of the father … We are not ministers, [*but*] we ae angels. (CRL Rights Commission 2017:21–22)

This line of reasoning, which sanctifies church leaders by attributing to themselves a degree of divinity, is prevalent among many neo-prophets across Africa.

This can also be demonstrated by Dr Hamilton Q. Nala, the leader of the *Nala Mandate*, who promotes an Afro-centric prosperity gospel he terms 'Plentianity', signifying a philosophy of abundance. Nala has rejected Christ and Christianity, characterising them as Western and colonial instruments of oppression against black Africans. Within his Plentianity philosophy, Nala has supplanted Christ, making himself King Somnala – the king of the kingdom of plenty.

The rejection of both Christ and the Bible has resulted in the establishment of a religious system entirely dependent on his

persona and personal teachings, thereby granting him absolute authority over the church. Nala presents himself not only in practical terms but also as a sacred figure – an omnipresent protector of his followers. He asserts that his adherents no longer require Jesus Christ, as he, Nala, possesses sufficient omnipresence and omnipotence to heal cancer, HIV and AIDS, and to intervene miraculously on behalf of his followers in dangerous situations, such as protecting them from being shot by criminals (Nala 2022). In this manner, Nala assumes the role of a divine figure, offering what he claims is a more effective religious system for his followers – one in which he himself replaces Christ.

Divine figures that are not limited by biblical morality

A primary strategy employed by controversial leaders to practise religious utilitarianism – thereby fostering gullibility and vulnerability among followers – is to present themselves as divine figures who are not constrained by biblical morality. These leaders often replace traditional moral standards with novel, permissive religious methods for healing and obtaining God's blessings. Much of the gullibility and vulnerability exhibited by followers of such church leaders stems from the belief that these individuals are unique men of God, endowed with divine authority to employ any means, including immoral ones, to secure positive outcomes for their followers. An analysis of controversial practices, such as compelling people to eat grass, consume dangerous substances or participate in outright criminal acts like the manipulation of followers to surrender their wealth, and the perpetration of rape and sexual exploitation, reveals a recurring notion that the 'man of God' is exempt from moral and spiritual standards in the pursuit of miraculous results. Prophets such as Lesego Daniel position themselves as possessing greater authority over their followers than God himself, to the extent that adherents place more value on the leader's declarations of absolution than on divine forgiveness (Frahm-Arp 2021, 2023).

Similarly, the belief among some leaders that they are uniquely chosen men of God, authorised to replace traditional religious systems and employ any means to achieve purportedly good ends, has resulted in numerous cases of sexual exploitation of women under the guise of healing and imparting blessings. Agazue (2016:2) documents instances where prophets persuade women that 'sex acts will save them from being possessed by an evil spirit or simply enable them to fulfil the "will of God"'. One might question why Christians do not inquire as to what kind of demons require exorcism through sexual activity with the prophet rather than through prayer, or what kind of divine will is fulfilled by an immoral act rather than a holy one, as is standard in the Bible.

It is deeply concerning that these church leaders not only employ fear but also exploit their status as representatives of God to alter divine laws regarding sexual morality. Actions that are explicitly condemned in the Bible are thus presented as righteous and holy simply because they are perpetrated by a 'man of God'. For example, one church leader reportedly sexually abused women in his congregation, claiming they had been 'given to him by God' and asserting that his 'hands and lips were holy' (*ZimLive.com* 2025), thereby engaging in sexual acts with them while insisting that he was not violating God's laws on sexual matters.

Kgatle (2021:91–112) documents numerous instances in which certain Christian prophetic figures exploit their prophetic authority and status as servants of God to demand sexual favours from predominantly economically disadvantaged women and young girls, engage in lewd sexual acts within the church in the presence of children and touch women in sexually inappropriate ways – actions that all constitute sexual molestation. The problem arises when conduct that is condemned in the Bible, regarded as wrong even by non-believers, and recognised as a serious offence in society, is accepted as legitimate and even viewed as a pathway to God's presence and blessings simply because it is perpetrated by a so-called man of God. Such conduct reflects an attitude suggesting that the prophet, as a 'clean man of God', has the liberty to engage in behaviour condemned as sin in the Bible while still fulfilling what are perceived to be the holy purposes of God for his people.

The argument presented in this section is that controversial religious figures deliberately employ distorted forms of religious utilitarianism to foster gullibility and vulnerability among their followers. The following section argues that although gullibility and vulnerability are evident in the actions of controversial religious leaders, it is overly simplistic to view their followers solely as passive victims. The role of followers' own agency in their susceptibility to gullibility and vulnerability should also be acknowledged.

Undermining the agency of worshippers by characterising them as gullible and vulnerable

The argument presented above posits that controversial prophetic church leaders derive their perspectives on contentious religious practices from the utilitarian outlook characteristic of ATRs. It may also be argued that this controversial utilitarian approach aligns with the ATR's understanding of religiosity. This prompts an examination of how bodies such as the CRL Rights Commission characterise ordinary members of these churches, often depicting them as gullible and vulnerable individuals in need of state protection. It is certainly tempting to interpret the belief that participation in reported reprehensible religious activities will result in divine favour as an extreme form of foolishness and naivety. It becomes challenging not to perceive gullibility and vulnerability when church members vehemently resist calls for their leaders to be held accountable and object to scrutiny by public officials seeking to understand the mechanisms of such abusive church systems.

For, as reported by the Commission:

> Thousands of Christian women, who were accompanying their religious leader to the hearings, were shown ululating and shouting to the religious leader 'my father, my father, my father', while others call out 'my bishop'. (CRL Rights Commission 2017:18)

There were also church members wearing black T-shirts bearing the words 'I am who God says I am' who were seen shouting 'my father, my father' to their church leader (CRL Rights Commission 2017:18). Some church members verbally abused the female chairperson of the CRL Rights Commission by calling her 'a devil worshipper, a Satanist, and the Devil's girlfriend' (CRL Rights Commission 2017:18). These actions by the followers may be interpreted as signs of gullibility and vulnerability, presenting the leaders as beyond question by the authorities or anyone else. This behaviour indicates that the followers were so devoted to their prophets and pastors that they were unwilling to consider the possibility of their leaders' fallibility, and therefore resisted public scrutiny, questioning and accountability regarding their belief systems and operational practices. To this extent, it can be acknowledged that the followers acted in a gullible and vulnerable manner.

However, characterising followers as gullible and vulnerable is highly misleading, as it portrays them as passive victims lacking agency within the systems that exploited and enslaved them. This depiction disregards Van Wyk's observation that, although controversial churches predominantly attract poor individuals, they also include significant numbers of professionals, businesspeople and politicians (Van Wyk 2019). Those who subscribe to the prosperity gospel promoted by controversial church leaders are not simply helpless victims of so-called cult leaders; rather, they frequently move between churches in pursuit of more effective spiritual practices and more powerful prophets (Van Wyk 2019). Consequently, disappointment with a particular prophet does not prompt believers to abandon the prosperity gospel altogether. Instead, they may leave the prophet or spiritual technology behind and seek out more compelling alternatives. For example, followers of Bushiri – who is currently on trial in South Africa for fraud, money laundering and the fabrication of miracles, among other charges – often continued to participate in the prosperity gospel religious system by turning to other prophets (Van Wyk 2019). It is important to recognise, therefore, that those who follow these controversial leaders are not merely naïve or credulous individuals, but people who deliberately select which prophet to follow based on specific needs or circumstances.

Despite clear indications of gullibility and vulnerability, it must be noted that followers of controversial leaders are not merely passive victims, but rather active participants in a utilitarian system sustained by spiritual exceptionalism, which is invoked through faith in the men of God (Forster & Pondani 2019). This spiritual exceptionalism encourages utilitarian religiosity by promoting the belief that, with sufficient faith, an individual may employ any method – regardless of its spiritual or immoral nature – to achieve the prosperity they desire. Consequently, the prophet is to be obeyed even if he prescribes immoral actions in the name of God (Kgatle 2021:99).

At times, followers consciously and deliberately seek the approval of the prophet above that of God (Frahm-Arp 2023). This utilitarian exceptionalism asserts that the laws of nature, culture, religious tradition, the state and morality do not apply to a truly spiritual person and leader; through their faith, God renders them an 'exception', permitting the use of even sinful means to secure divine blessing (Forster & Pondani 2019). Therefore, characterisations of gullibility and vulnerability should not be uncritically applied to the followers of controversial religious leaders, as such reductionist approaches diminish the active agency of followers who seek to cultivate their own spiritual power within the utilitarian system in which they are actively engaged.

The possibility of addressing gullibility and vulnerability by regulating religion

For the CRL Rights Commission, the proposed solution to the abuse of religion and followers by controversial prophetic leaders – who promote gullibility and vulnerability – lies in the regulation of religion. The Commission has advocated for churches to self-regulate under its supervision, positioning itself as the central authority responsible for registering religious leaders. This article contends, however, that even with self-regulation by churches, the Commission lacks the capacity to effectively regulate or oversee religious regulation (Coertzen 2017:20–22). This limitation arises from its secular, humanistic perspective, which is primarily focused on human rights and does not adequately account for the complex spiritual, cosmological and theological factors that shape individuals' religious beliefs, behaviours and practices.

Above all, the CRL Rights Commission is neither a religious nor an ecumenical body, and it lacks the technical and theological expertise required to analyse and evaluate the complex theological and religious frameworks underlying spiritual and doctrinal matters (Coertzen 2017:20–22). A fundamental flaw in the CRL Rights Commission's hard stance on regulating churches is a reductionist, institutionalised view of the church that fails to grasp the deep theological complexities of the reality called 'church'. The Commission seems to believe that all churches can be subsumed under ecumenical structures, yet there are many churches theologically opposed to denominationalism and ecumenism, viewing independence as a theological foundation for fidelity to Christ's exclusive headship. Such churches will view the Commission's compulsion to join ecumenical bodies as a compromise of doctrinal purity and a dilution of their identity and exclusive allegiance to Christ. Therefore, the CRL Rights Commission's adversarial approach to regulating religion is likely to be perceived by some churches as a form of religious persecution because it

infringes upon their conscience and theological identity. Such adversarial perceptions risk damaging the Commission's legitimacy, casting it as an opponent of the church and thereby undermining both its effectiveness and public credibility.

A further challenge, already intimated in the preceding sections, is the rationalistic approach to religious activities that does not seem to consider the worldview that prompts them. For example, the Commission can readily address prophets' material acts of criminality, such as rape, sexual exploitation of women and young girls, incidents of fraudulent miracles, fraud and money laundering. However, it is questionable whether the Commission can challenge the underlying worldviews and spiritual beliefs that lead congregants to submit to sexual, financial and material exploitation by their religious leaders. Interestingly, it is worth noting that while the *Witchcraft Suppression Act* succeeded in criminalising accusations of witchcraft against others, it failed to eradicate belief in witchcraft or to end the horrors associated with witch-hunting and the burning of those suspected of witchcraft. Regulating religion and portraying victims of controversial religious leaders as gullible and vulnerable, while accurate to some extent, remains inadequate in addressing the utilitarian perspective on spiritual power that compels some individuals to remain loyal to leaders who have been scrutinised in courts of law and found lacking, or whose actions and claims have failed to withstand public scrutiny, such as Pastor Timothy Omotoso. Although he was acquitted after an 8-year trial on numerous allegations of rape, sexual violation and human trafficking of young girls – after the judge determined that the prosecution had mishandled the case (Chibelushi 2025) – the harrowing testimonies of some young women who alleged severe sexual abuse did not deter some women from continuing to support him as a prophet of God.

Similarly, some individuals have not ceased to regard Alph Lukau as a man of God, continuing to place their faith in him for miracles despite widely publicised allegations of a staged resurrection – allegations that drew condemnation even from President Cyril Ramaphosa (Shange & Gous 2019). Likewise, many continue to believe that Shepherd Bushiri is a prophet of God, although, as of March 2026, he remains a fugitive from justice facing serious charges of fabricating miracles, corruption, fraud and money laundering in South African courts. This observation highlights the complex and profound worldview, theological, and religious dimensions within African religiosity that motivate some individuals to willingly subject themselves to questionable, risky, humiliating and dehumanising religious practices in the hope of ultimately receiving the blessings they seek.

A significant challenge to the regulation of religion is the strong appeal that the utilitarian approach to religion holds for many Africans, which often involves risky, irrational and secretive religious practices (Comaroff & Comaroff 2018; Geschiere 1997; Wood 2008). This attraction persists, as individuals continue to pursue such approaches despite personal risks, provided they believe there is a possibility of achieving the material and spiritual benefits they desire without suffering harm. Some Africans continue to seek clandestine and sinister means of acquiring wealth, even when practitioners explicitly warn that these powers may demand the blood of relatives or inflict other severe harm upon the user.

Therefore, while characterising the victims of controversial church leaders as gullible and vulnerable may accurately reflect aspects of spiritual immaturity, limited critical thinking and a lack of discernment, it overlooks the significant motivation and appeal of utilitarian religiosity among many Africans. Efforts to regulate religion, and the perception that followers of dubious religious leaders are merely gullible and vulnerable, are problematic primarily because they do not sufficiently consider the prioritisation of 'what works' over 'what is true'. This orientation leads individuals to engage in risky and dangerous religious practices, motivated by the hope of acquiring enough spiritual power to control harmful or malevolent spiritual forces and obtain the outcomes they desire.

The question that remains is this: Because the church in South Africa has not been successful in curbing abusive and controversial religious practices, what role should the CRL Rights Commission assume? This article contends that, instead of acting as an authoritative regulator issuing orders to the church, the Commission should adopt a posture of partnership that works with churches to guide them to embody a Christian faith that upholds the principles of human rights and human dignity. Such a partnership must not be dictatorial, but be attentive to the diverse and complex realities of the church and engage collaboratively with church organisations and ecumenical bodies such as the South African Council of Churches and the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (Kgatle 2022b), while also working with independent churches that theologically affirm autonomous ecclesial identity, in order to raise awareness on critical issues. Indeed, it was arguably this partnership model that enabled organisations combating HIV and AIDS to secure the churches' buy-in in promoting sexual and reproductive health within faith communities. By contrast, a combative approach that portrays Christianity as a societal danger to be curbed will only provoke resistance and deepen mistrust among churches. However, aspects of criminality such as abuse of children, money laundering, fraud and cases of sexual violations such as rape should be dealt with by the law agencies that are competent to adequately address such issues (Coertzen 2017:9; Henrico 2019:14).

Towards a Christian ontological response to gullibility and vulnerability of believers in controversial churches

At a conference organised by the Southern African Society for Pentecostal Studies, held at the University of Venda in Thohoyandou, on 25–27 February, 2026, Tsholofelo K. Kukuni (University of South Africa) presented a paper

titled 'Legal-Theology as an Interdisciplinary Module in Theological Training in South Africa' (Kukuni 2026). Kukuni (2026) lamented that:

> [*I*]n the context of growing public concern about harmful religious practices, some Christian church leaders resist calls for accountability by appealing to theological claims concerning spiritual authority and religious autonomy. (n.p.)

Indeed, Christian church leaders in South Africa reject the possibility of regulatory oversight by referring to the autonomy of their ministerial calling by God, the autonomy of the Christian church and constitutional freedom of religion, The problem is that 'when theology is insulated from ethical and legal scrutiny, these appeals may unintentionally shield abusive or exploitative practices from critique' (Kukuni 2026:n.p.). To remedy this situation, Kukuni (2026:n.p.). proposes the development of legal-theology as an interdisciplinary component within theological education to equip church leaders with the ethical and legal literacy necessary to engage responsibly with constitutional values, human dignity and the protection of vulnerable believers. In other words, the church of Christ must not ignore the problem of abuse grounded in gullibility and vulnerability of believers by clinging to spiritual authority and religious authority. Instead, the church must, through legally sound doctrinal formulation and theological education, instil theological frameworks that equip Christian leaders and the church at large to prioritise constitutional values, human dignity and the well-being of vulnerable believers and, one may add, the non-believers as well. For all human beings, the believers and non-believers, are equally valuable to God.

Instead of endorsing dubious religious conduct rooted in religious utilitarianism, the Christian church must confront the gullibility and vulnerability of believers by promoting ontological religiosity based on 'what is true' rather than the utilitarian 'what works' (Kroesbergen 2019; Wells 1993). The responsibility for safeguarding the integrity and purity of the church rests not with secular state bodies such as the CRL Rights Commission, but with biblically informed Christians (Banda 2020:8). Therefore, the collective church, as the body of Christ, must theologically address the heretical ontological factors that contribute to a utilitarian, commodified and commercialised perception of the church. This is essential to restrain predatory churches that prioritise the interests of avaricious clergy at the expense of often vulnerable congregants (Banda 2020:8).

Furthermore, Christian believers must be guided to exercise their agency responsibly, avoiding involvement in abusive spiritual relationships with unprincipled spiritual leaders. They should employ their agency to cultivate a personal relationship with the gracious, loving and just God who upholds and affirms the human dignity and personal worth of all people, regardless of race or social status. In light of the solemn biblical injunctions for Christians to remain vigilant against deception, each believer bears responsibility for protecting themselves from manipulative and abusive religious leaders. At the same time, conscientious Christian leaders have a duty to instruct their members, equipping them to avoid gullibility and vulnerability. Accordingly, the faithful must be safeguarded through the adoption of a sound, responsible hermeneutical framework that preserves the integrity of the church by preventing practices that exploit congregants.

When believers theologically comprehend that God engages with them ontologically – that is, as a personal and relational being who is loving, holy, just and good – rather than utilitarianly – as an impersonal and amoral entity influenced by the size, rhythm and outward appearances of people's activities and sacrifices – they are better equipped to resist the gullibility and vulnerability fostered by questionable leaders. Such leaders, who sexually abuse women in their churches by claiming that these women have been 'given to them by God' and that their 'hands and lips were holy' (*ZimLive.com* 2025), exploit utilitarian understandings of faith. The ontological perspective encourages Christians to seek universal truth that applies to all, whereas the utilitarian approach, as demonstrated by the practices of controversial religious leaders, often enables those in power to exploit the more vulnerable members of society.

Conclusion

This article sought to address the question: How does the characterisation of followers of controversial faith healers as gullible and vulnerable appear when individuals' adherence to questionable religious practitioners is examined from a utilitarian perspective? The analysis approached this question from the standpoint of ATR, where religion is often utilised as a means to achieve specific objectives. The article assessed the validity of the CRL Rights Commission's problematic depiction of followers of controversial religious systems in South Africa as *gullible* and *vulnerable*.

There is some justification for viewing individuals' submission to the manipulative systems of controversial leaders as a form of naivety, warranting intervention by authorities to protect vulnerable and disadvantaged people from exploitation by unscrupulous religious figures. However, it is argued that regulatory approaches do not adequately address the utilitarian character of religion among Africans, which motivates and enables individuals to engage with risky religious contexts in the hope of acquiring sufficient spiritual power to control these hazardous elements for their own benefit.

The article argues that it is the responsibility of the church, rather than the CRL Rights Commission, to take a leading role in addressing rogue Christian leaders who perpetuate abusive religious systems. Devout Christians should employ sound biblical hermeneutical methods to challenge and dismantle the utilitarian religious frameworks promoted by controversial leaders. While the Commission's regulatory efforts may succeed in criminalising certain controversial religious groups, they are unlikely to eliminate these groups, as their pragmatic spirituality continues to resonate with many Africans.

However, the Christian church can safeguard its members by addressing the gullibility and vulnerability present among Christians in South Africa. This may be achieved by emphasising the relational dimension of the ontological understanding of religion, which acknowledges the protective value of sound doctrine. Such an approach necessitates reducing the sacralisation of prophetic authority by ensuring prophets are held accountable for their actions within the church. Finally, as previously mentioned, the church should adopt a sound and responsible hermeneutical framework that preserves the integrity of the church and prevents the abuse of congregants.

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Collium Banda: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Disclaimer

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