

Emotionalism: A potential hybrid syncretistic expression in Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostalism

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Background: In Pentecostal theology, a considerable emphasis is placed on emotions and experience in Pentecostal gatherings. As a result, the liturgical expressions are often deeply infused with an atmosphere of emotional intensity. The risk is the excessive emphasis on emotions and experience that may ultimately result in emotionalism and, when infused with the biblical message, can manifest as a form of syncretism, leading to heretical biblical interpretations and manipulation.

Objectives: A clear distinction must be drawn between emotionalism and the experiences and emotional responses that emerge from the authentic activity of the Holy Spirit, requiring theological and spiritual discernment to guard against emotionalism in praxis by pursuing a predetermined outcome, often deliberately encouraged by leaders as a means of self-enrichment.

Method: A literature study will be conducted, employing practical, systematic, sociological and hermeneutical theological perspectives to examine the theological significance and potential risks associated with emotionalism manifesting as a form of syncretism.

Results: Findings show that emotional intensity cultivated through exuberant worship and charismatic preaching can result in emotionalism and the exploitation of the congregation. The infusion of the biblical message with emotionalism gives rise to a syncretistic challenge that can substitute for the genuine work of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion: The emphasis on emotion and experience requires theological guidance to avert emotionalism, as a syncretistic challenge.

Contribution: Discerning and confronting emotionalism as a syncretistic challenge amid the volatility of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, while still fostering emotions and experience within the authentic work of the Spirit.

Keywords: syncretism; Pentecostalism; emotions; experience; worship; emotionalism; manipulation; exploitation.

Introduction

Pentecostals find their identity in Spirit baptism and charismatic experiences, with worship as its highest expression. Its spirituality is vibrant and experiential, which is central to its appeal. Defined as a dynamic Christian movement with a unique theological perspective, Pentecostalism fosters a joyful and Spirit-led life. Its remarkable growth is also attributed to its engaging worship, preaching and liturgy. Active participation in worship and during the sermon is a defining feature of Pentecostal and charismatic services. The congregation engages in dynamic singing while passionate sermons inspire responses from the congregation. Fervent prayer, soul-stirring music and heartfelt testimonies create an electrifying atmosphere. Worship itself becomes a declaration of God's presence among the people (Nel 2016b:2–4, 2020:2).

The ecstatic nature of Pentecostal worship manifests in expressions of various forms such as prophetic speech, prayer, song and glossolalia. During such experiences, worshippers, while subjectively aware, may lack full comprehension. As a faith community that is endowed with the gifts of the Spirit and the capacity for spiritual guidance, Pentecostals actively contribute to the sermon by participating through 'call-and-response'. This dynamic verbal interaction between preacher and congregation shapes the sermon's delivery. Congregants are encouraged to affirm the preacher's statements with responses such as 'amen' and 'hallelujah' or to repeat phrases and make audible declarations (Nel 2016b:2–4, 2020:2).

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the topical collection titled 'The Challenge of Syncretism in Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism', under the expert guidance of guest editors, Prof. Marius Nel and Prof. Mookgo Solomon Kgatle.

In Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, considerable emphasis is placed on personal experience. It is contended that the Holy Spirit should be encountered in every aspect of Pentecostal gatherings and services. This applies to the praise and worship elements of the liturgy as well as to the preaching. This cultivates an environment where the anointing of the Holy Spirit becomes a palpable experience for both the preacher and the congregation. As a result, the liturgical expressions within Pentecostal services are deeply infused with an atmosphere of emotional intensity. However, the emotional and experiential dimensions of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism are susceptible to exploitation and manipulation, particularly when they evolve into a hybrid form characterised by emotionalism. Emotionalism treats emotion as an end in itself, focusing solely on immersive experiences that directly engage the feelings, often at the expense of intellectual reflection and is characterised by a loss of control and excess (Jones 1967), which can result in fanaticism.

A substantial body of literature has explored syncretism within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, addressing various topics such as the prosperity gospel, African religious influences, the use of material objects, prophecy and healing (Anderson 2001:98; Nel 2023:6–17; Shingange 2024:1-12; Tagwirei 2024:1–21). Additionally, broader reflections on syncretism exist. In his theorisation of syncretism and fundamentalism, Droogers (2005) observes:

Though the comparison is not the most obvious, there are striking similarities between fundamentalists and positivists, on the one hand and between constructivists and syncretists, on the other. Thus, viewed each in their own context, they present more grounds for comparison. Syncretism and fundamentalism make a very different use of the same religious repertoires for religious construction and reproduction. (pp. 463–471)

Given this perspective, it is argued that emotionalism can also be conceptualised within the framework of syncretism.

This study seeks to highlight the potential risks inherent within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism when emotionalism is employed to elicit specific outcomes, resulting in a hybridisation of emotion, experience and the biblical message. Such outcomes may create the illusion of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit when, in fact, emotionalism becomes a counterforce. This may facilitate the manipulation and exploitation of congregants, contributing to the self-enrichment and self-glorification of those in leadership.

Study design

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SCRE) (Ethics no: NWU-01327-25-A6).

Research methods and design

A literature study will examine the theological significance of experience and emotions and allude to potential risks

associated with emotionalism manifesting as a form of syncretism. Articles from a Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal perspective are deliberately used to provide a more balanced view of the scholarly debate about the issue. As a methodological limitation, this study will not employ formal case studies; instead, illustrative examples will be drawn from the reviewed literature.

Syncretism

The concept of syncretism is among the earliest scholarly terms introduced to describe the fusion of beliefs and originated in Greek culture, where it signified the assimilation of diverse groups into a unified entity. Over time, its meaning expanded to encompass the reconciliation of differing schools of thought, cultures and religions. Within the Greek cultural context, syncretism was viewed positively, referring to the successful integration of diverse ideas and practices. In its most straightforward and literal sense, syncretism, as understood in anthropology, sociology and religious studies, denotes the interaction and fusion of different religious traditions, resulting in the blending of two or more religious systems. A notable example of this is Hellenistic syncretism, where elements from multiple religions merged, leading to mutual influence. In the ancient world, scholars found the concept particularly useful in describing instances where cultures in contact expanded the scope of their religious traditions or aligned their deities with those of a dominant culture or religion. Some scholars argue that syncretism entails interweaving multiple belief systems into a composite framework of beliefs and practices. For instance, it is believed that the Neo-Babylonian Empire of the 6th century before common era (BCE) extended the creative role of its principal gods by incorporating elements from Assyrian and Egyptian creator deities (Nel 2017b:2; Orogun 2023:1).

There is also the argument that syncretic elements are intrinsic to all religions, even when they negatively impact specific religious traditions. In other words, syncretism is relative to how 'religion' is defined and understood. Some scholars argue that the religious traditions represented in the Old Testament embody a synthesis of elements from Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Israelite belief systems (Nel 2017b:2; Orogun 2023:1).

Orogun (2023:2) observes that the term 'syncretism' derives from the Greek word *synkretismos*, originating from the ancient island of Crete, where the Cretans, known for their frequent internal conflicts, would set aside their differences and unite to confront external threats when necessary. They referred to this act of solidarity as *synkretismos*, meaning 'to combine'. Syncretism has been a persistent phenomenon throughout history, from the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds to contemporary societies, suggesting that no historical period has been devoid of syncretic influences. Furthermore, syncretism is not confined to religious contexts; historical evidence indicates that even in warfare, nations and tribes have adopted this principle. Thus, syncretism can be understood as the interaction, intersection and hybridisation

of concepts, ideas and cultures. Syncretism has often been viewed negatively, largely because it has been framed as implying inauthenticity or contamination, suggesting the infiltration of a supposedly 'pure' religious tradition by external, 'impure' influences (Nel 2017b:3; Orogun 2023:2). Syncretism may also be defined as the inappropriate fusion of belief systems and practices that are fundamentally incompatible or the blending of doctrinal elements that are inherently contradictory. Furthermore, it involves integrating authentic concepts and truths of a revealed faith with other religious claims (Kgatle & Ngubane 2023:2).

Contextualisation has played a pivotal role in the expansion of Pentecostalism, particularly within the Global South. However, it simultaneously bears the risk of leading to syncretism, such as the so-called prosperity theology. Moreover, it can contribute to the consolidation of hierarchical leadership structures, whereby authority becomes overly centralised in the figure of the pastor or prophet. This dynamic raises serious concerns regarding the potential for authoritarianism, spiritual abuse and the exploitation of vulnerable believers (Kgatle & Mofokeng 2019:3; Nel & Kgatle 2024:1). The selective interpretation of Scripture, manipulating specific verses to support its teachings while neglecting the broader biblical context, is, in many instances, accompanied by the stirring of emotions, manipulation and incitement, thereby distorting the overall biblical message.

Scholarly debates on syncretism in African Pentecostalism are complex, reflecting diverse interactions between religious practices, beliefs and local cultures, complicating the analysis of syncretic expressions within Pentecostal churches (Marimbe 2024:4). It is, however, submitted that another syncretistic challenge is facing Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals. This stems from the tendency to fuse emotions and experiences with an atmosphere of intense religious fervour in liturgical settings, thereby hybridising and cultivating emotionalism aimed at producing specific outcomes and responses. Experiences are deliberately crafted and reinforced using pulsating music, repetitive singing of choruses and fervent preaching, often accompanied by dynamic call-and-response interactions, as listeners are actively enticed to respond to specific suggestions and intimation. Congregants are encouraged to affirm the preacher's statements by responding with expressions such as 'amen' and 'hallelujah' or by repeating phrases and making audible declarations and, in this way, being indoctrinated with erroneous biblical beliefs.

The fusion of emotions with artificially constructed experiences of questionable biblical validity may result in a syncretic expression of emotionalism, ultimately giving rise to a new form of religion devoid of the authentic work of the Holy Spirit. Nel and Kgatle (2024:1) argue that while Pentecostal scholarship addresses numerous pertinent issues of Pentecostalism, there seems to be a lack of critical evaluation regarding syncretism, its impact on the movement and its potential threat to Pentecostal theology and practice.

This article argues that the same applies to emotionalism as an integral aspect of syncretism.

The hybridising potential of experience and emotion in the formation of emotionalism

Religious experience is fundamental and remains as significant today as it was during its emergence over a century ago in Pentecostalism. As understood through this self-identification, Pentecostal theology is an experiential spirituality rooted in the events of the Day of Pentecost. Pentecostals believe that this experience remains accessible in the present, whether as a continuation, repetition or expansion, sometimes encompassing all three of the original event. Some scholars contend that this experiential dimension, rather than specific doctrinal themes, is the central unifying characteristic of Pentecostalism, particularly given its global expansion. Moreover, this emphasis on experience continues to shape the movement today (Stephenson 2019:188; Vondey 2017:2).

This emphasis on personal experience, actively seeking a direct encounter with God, is essential to Pentecostalism and should be nurtured and developed with appropriate responsibility. This divine-human encounter is not pursued merely for the sake of the experience itself but ultimately as a transformative encounter that brings about spiritual and personal change (Stephenson 2019:201). Embracing experience fosters the belief that worship should engage the whole person. This experiential approach necessitates enthusiastic participation as an expression of faith. The expectation of a dynamic and immersive encounter with God makes emotional responses integral to Pentecostal worship. Full participation is encouraged in all forms of worship, fostering transformative experiences, distinguishing it from a mere emotional experience without substance, which can lead to emotionalism.

However, this experiential focus and participatory ethos risk fostering hybridisation, where emotional expression merges with fabricated experiences, potentially resulting in emotionalism lacking the authentic activity of the Holy Spirit. Togarasei (2015:62) points out that while rap and R&B music, along with dancing, jumping and singing, are distinctly secular in nature, the incorporation of these genres into worship has been defended on the basis that the church must offer those aspects people seek and experience in the secular world. This may ultimately result in emotionalism fused with the biblical message and, syncretically, manifests as a new type of religion. Marimbe (2024:8,9) argues that the worship in these settings is so intense that the music resembles that of a disco or nightclub. The activities are highly emotional, enthusiastic and entertaining, with every member actively engaged in the liturgy.

This focus on experience can sometimes take precedence over doctrine, as doctrine becomes subordinate to personal encounters or may even be dismissed as false if not personally validated through an emotional experience. As a result, the

liturgical expressions within Pentecostal services can be deeply infused with an atmosphere of emotional intensity. In addition, there is also the risk that such experiences may, at times, be artificially induced (Kgatle 2020:3; Nel 2016a:6). The centrality of experience in Pentecostal spirituality stems from its immediacy, in contrast to facts, which can only be verified retrospectively and even then, such verification remains open to scrutiny (Daniels 2023:203).

Human experience is considered valid insofar as it occurs within reality, while facts, by contrast, are derived from experience and are not inherently true or false. Pentecostals relate their experiences to Scripture, drawing upon biblical narratives and events to interpret and validate their present encounters. They perceive their experiences as a continuation of these biblical events, reimagined and manifested in the present. This distinction is particularly significant, as research suggests that most decisions are not primarily based on objective, fact-driven data but rather on individual emotional engagement (Daniels 2023:203; Vondey 2017:16). Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals hold that the activity of the Holy Spirit extends beyond the boundaries of the written Word, affirming that the Spirit is not confined solely to Scripture. Rather, they assert that the Spirit continues to communicate with and guide the church through a variety of means, including prophecy, visions, dreams, spiritual impressions, and spontaneous utterances during worship. This broader understanding of divine communication reflects a dynamic and relational theology in which the Spirit remains actively involved in the lived experience of the faith community.

However, this approach can lead some to prioritise personal experience and extra-biblical revelation over the Bible, resulting in heretical teachings (Nel 2017a:300) and fabricated experiences. Kgatle (2020:3) points out that in early Pentecostalism, 'the experiences of spiritual encounters of visions, revelations, signs and wonders and other manifestations of the Spirit's presence and power' served as both the foundation and driving force of Pentecostal missiology, a dynamic that continues in contemporary New Prophetic Churches. Kgatle, however, contends that there are fundamental differences in how these visions and manifestations are experienced, noting that while early Pentecostals had authentic encounters, some prophets within New Prophetic Churches 'fake such experiences' (Kgatle 2020:3).

In discussing the most significant elements of the hermeneutics of experience, Nel (2021:5) identifies several challenges, including the tendency of affection leading to subjectivist interpretation and the potential for ideological exploitation and abuse of interpretation. He points out that experience and affections are inherently individualistic and subjectivist, even within communal group experiences, requiring safeguards to prevent subjectivist and ideological misinterpretation.¹ Stewart (2024:2) points out that regrettably,

1. Nel (2021:5) proposed a three-tiered approach to mitigate the risks of subjectivist interpretation, emphasising the need for active participation from the Pentecostal faith community, suggesting the following: 'The three-tiered questions that should

'Experiences based solely upon feelings and void of biblical validity have increasingly become the norm in our religious world'.

Emotions will invariably remain a fundamental aspect of Pentecostal theology, which resists being reduced to a purely intellectual or cognitive endeavour. Emotional expression is not seen as peripheral but as central to encountering God, participating in worship, and discerning the work of the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on affective experience reflects a theological framework in which emotions are viewed as vital in the divine-human interaction. Emotions and religious experiences possess therapeutic significance, as they can alter an individual's self-perception, outlook on life, understanding of the world and relationships with others (Glaz 2020:577). Emotions, therefore, play an intricate part in the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal worship service. Pentecostals maintain that their encounter with the Holy Spirit prompts a response shaped by their emotional perception, as the Holy Spirit is experienced emotionally, as evidenced throughout the Bible, particularly in the Book of Acts (Daniels 2023:216; see Ac 2:46, Ac 8:8, Ac 13:52, Ac 16:34). Worship, preaching and the response to preaching will inevitably involve an element of emotional experience and reaction. This is an essential characteristic of both Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, which must be recognised and responsibly managed.

Pentecostals cultivate high-energy atmospheres in their corporate gatherings and, while musical styles vary across communities, are often characterised by their high volume. Ecstatic experience consistently involves subjective deliberation, with the determination and attribution of meaning, whether in terms of valuation or singularisation, being individually defined (Cooper 2012:1). Miller and Strongman (2002:8) argue that emotional worship services constitute a normative system of emotions and behaviours that unfold throughout a religious ritual. Furthermore, they assert that music possesses inherent qualities that have consistently been shown to elicit emotion-specific physiological changes in individuals. They reference research indicating that certain musical structures and compositional techniques, along with the loudness of sound, have been shown to evoke intense emotional experiences, often accompanied by physical responses such as trembling and 'chills'. They argue that the musical structures utilised in Pentecostal churches correspond with those tendencies known to provoke such physiological and emotional reactions. These structures may not only induce a heightened state of physiological arousal but also elicit profound emotional experiences. Once physiological arousal is triggered within a church setting, the congregants' cognitive appraisal of this arousal subsequently informs their subjective experience of a particular emotion (Miller & Strongman 2002:8). Togarasei (2015:62) argues that

(footnote 1 continues...)
be asked are: what does the text mean to me (an individual), to them (the wider church through the ages), and to us (the local faith community)? The interaction of these voices provides Pentecostals with safeguards against the overwhelming dominance of a single voice, acknowledging the difficulty of analytically isolating God's propositional content from His personal communion, and offering "checkpoints" against "me," "them," and "us".

Pentecostal churches have transformed church music through the incorporation of modern musical instruments, often matching or even surpassing those used by secular musical bands. In addition, they have adopted secular musical styles and genres, with some instances of church music being characterised by a prominent 'drum and bass' soundtrack, reflecting the influence of the South African township music genre known as kwaito. Czeglédy (2008:296) argues that this unconventional musical selection is deliberate rather than arbitrary, as kwaito stands as a seminal cultural expression within contemporary South African youth identity, as its inclusion communicates a profoundly resonant and contextually relevant message to the audience.

Within Pentecostalism, however, there is a realisation of the tension with emotions. Some within Pentecostalism want to minimise the role of emotion and feeling by insisting that worshippers must praise God without seeking personal gratification, asserting that music should primarily serve to glorify God and that worship must function as a doctrinal tool (Cooper 2011:181). Some argue that music is not meant to make the congregants feel good but to bring glory to God and be part of the church's teaching ministry (Cooper 2011:181). They contend that the subjective affective experience characteristic of musical ecstasy within charismatic religious traditions prompts a significant theological concern. When congregants perceive themselves as spiritually edified or 'blessed' by the music's extraordinary aesthetic power and respond with intensified emotion, it creates a theological unease. Such a response poses the question of the true source of this affective response: is it a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's presence or merely the product of the refined artistry of the human musician? (Becker 2004:79; Cooper 2012:4).

Pentecostal spirituality is, however, not merely an expression of exuberant experience or revival but rather the personal and communal participation in the biblical narrative of God actualised in Jesus Christ and made possible through the Holy Spirit. At the core of Pentecostal spirituality lies the experience of the Holy Spirit, from which religious practices emerge. This experience is understood not as a mere possibility but as an actual and immediate revelation of God, seeking expression and mediation in the lives of both the individual and the community. These are not merely spontaneous emotional states but rather transformative expressions of an encounter with God (Cooper 2012:6; Vondey 2017:25, 2018:5–6). While Pentecostal preaching includes information and argument, it primarily seeks to transform, engaging emotions and the will. While emotions are not necessarily equated with spirituality, they are seen as natural by-products of a genuine encounter with God, fostering spiritual depth and life change. True spirituality is ultimately measured by a reformed lifestyle aligned with New Testament principles (Nel 2017a:294). Stewart (2024:1) rightly argues that emotions have a legitimate role in worship, as they are divinely given. When appropriately nurtured and guided, they serve to edify worshippers and glorify God.

Experience, fundamental to Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal traditions, may then, in conclusion, be understood as personal, embodied encounters with God, particularly mediated through the Holy Spirit. This encompasses Spirit baptism, frequently evidenced by speaking in tongues, profound emotional responses in worship or prayer and the continuing transformation of the believer's life. Pentecostalism strongly emphasises an 'experiential Christianity' in which faith is not solely intellectual or institutional, but lived, felt and expressed through moral renewal, communal engagement and the exercise of charismatic gifts. However, when misused, they may give rise to emotionalism.

The influence of self-aggrandising leadership on the emergence of syncretistic expressions within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism

Within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, leaders readily ascribed titles to themselves such as apostle, prophet, cardinal and bishop rather than pastor. These self-acclaimed titles play a central role in shaping the spiritual ethos of their communities in the emotional experiences of the congregants, significantly influencing the authority over their followers. Experiencing and being influenced by the charisma and persona of the leader, who elevates himself or herself to a particular status, also creates distorted experiences for the congregants. Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019:3) point out that the reverence afforded to some of these leaders as the divinely appointed spokesperson imbues their declarations with unquestionable authority, effectively precluding any form of challenge or appeal.

Banda (2021:3) asserts that the theological framework supporting the activities of so-called prophets within African Neo-Pentecostalism, which legitimises their contentious practices, conflicts with fundamental Christian doctrines and ethical principles. Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019:3) note that Neo-Pentecostal ministries have been beset by allegations of abuse. This prompted an inquiry by the Council for the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Linguistic and Religious Communities. Although these questionable practices were duly condemned and proposals for regulation put forward, the viability and constitutional legitimacy of regulating the religious sector have been subjects of considerable debate, with no apparent prosecution by the commission (Kgatle 2017:1; Khanyile 2016:115; Resane 2017:5).

These prophets project an image of contemporary sophistication through their extensive use of modern technology and the latest fashion trends in both dress and vehicles. The undue prominence ascribed to and often asserted by such pastors is particularly evident within the prosperity gospel movement, where congregants are frequently subjected to coercion in the form of financial contributions directed towards the leader. Addy (2013:7) notes that this practice is validated as an 'act of sowing' into the lives of so-called 'God's anointed'. The hierarchical leadership structure, which reflects authoritarian models of governance, centralises power in the hands of pastors,

potentially leading to abuse and exploitation. Moreover, the selective interpretation of Scripture, isolating specific verses to support its teachings while neglecting the broader context, results in the distortion of the overall message (Nel & Kgatle 2024:1). The issue of questionable leaders is furthermore illustrated by the leaders of New Prophetic Churches, who reject any form of accountability, asserting that, as prophets who receive divine revelation, they should not be questioned or suspected of wrongdoing by their followers. The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities proposed implementing a peer review mechanism to address the growing concerns regarding the misuse of religion by pastors. However, this proposal was dismissed, indicating that these contentious leaders seek to evade accountability (Kgatle 2020:3). The influence of some Neo-Pentecostal leaders has even been labelled as 'hypnosis', indiscriminately employed on vulnerable and unsuspecting individuals, whereby they are disconnected from reality and induced into a state in which they perceive everything through a 'spiritual' lens while their emotions are intensified and their state of consciousness altered (Kgatle 2017:6).

These practices gave rise to the negative perception that Pentecostalism is used for exploitation and manipulation. Pentecostal churches have faced criticism with reports of exploitation and manipulation of their followers for financial gain, damaging the movement's reputation (Ngwoke 2024:2, 4). Okoye (2007:89) asserts that influential preachers possess the ability to merge scriptural content and performance style with a so-called 'anointing' and contends that Chris Oyakhilome, leader of the large Neo-Pentecostal church Christ Embassy, is undeniably a maestro in this regard.²

These unchallenged and unbiblical tendencies can lead to manipulation, exploitation and abuse, with emotionalism replacing the authentic experience of the Holy Spirit with distorted experiences. Vondey (2017:17) draws attention to the unhealthy focus on experience when he asserts that: '... certain doctrines rely much more on Pentecostal experience than on the power of explanation'. I will argue that this is also true when the distorted experiences that centre on the leader's *persona* weigh more than the imperative of sound biblical doctrines and the explanation thereof. Such a misguided emotional engagement with the leader, particularly when the worship service is characterised by an atmosphere of heightened emotional intensity, can become a

²Okoye (2007:87) elaborates on the performance aspects of Chris Oyakhilome in the following observation: 'In Christ Embassy's worship services, the physical presence of "a man of God," the lead performer, serves to set off the space even more intensely from everywhere else. While her or his aura or presence suffuses and elevates the entire environment, the space immediately surrounding her or his physical body is particularly saturated, thereby making it once-removed from the general church geography and twice-removed from the everyday. This holiest space is the stage, which also hosts the altar, and is effectively more circumscribed than the conventional theatre stage: geographically, it is usually elevated, aesthetically, it is more decorated, spiritually, it hosts a more concentrated presence of the Holy Ghost, strategically, it constitutes the visual focus for everyone who is not on it, and manually, it is policed by security personnel in dark suits who forcefully discourage unwarranted invasion. A professional lighting design, comprising footlights, floods, robotics and spots add colour, mood and visual intensity to the stage. Combined with such decorative devices as textured backdrops, blooming flowers and fresh plants, the stage emerges in clear relief from the other stations of the church.'

hybrid of emotionalism. This may ultimately lead to a faith grounded in the personal spiritual stature of the leader which reflects a form of cultism, as the entire religious experience becomes wholly dependent on the leader rather than on Christ (Banda 2021:4). The principal risk lies in an excessive emphasis on the so-called 'anointed of God' who seeks to elicit a particular response primarily through emotional stimulation and experiences.

Emotionalism as a syncretistic manifestation in religious expression

Liturgical expressions within Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal services are often deeply imbued with emotional intensity, necessitating discernment to guard against the potential excesses of emotionalism. Jones (1967) argued that emotionalism treats emotion as an end in itself, focusing entirely on the experience of immersion. Emotionalism directly appeals to feelings, often at the expense of intellectual engagement and is characterised by a loss of control and a tendency towards excess (Jones 1967). The Collins Dictionary (2025) defines emotionalism as a 'strong or excessive appeal to the emotions' while the Merriam-Webster (2025) dictionary defines it as a 'tendency to regard emotionally' or 'the undue indulgence in or display of emotion'.

The theological concern within the context of worship is that impassioned appeals propagated amid an atmosphere of heightened religious fervour and emotionalism are directed towards spiritually vulnerable congregants who ascribe undue reverence to the leader. Such dynamics risk undermining the primacy of Christ and the discernment of the Spirit, giving way to manipulative practices masked as spiritual authority.

Mossière (2011) claims that Pentecostal gatherings are distinguished by a profound sense of individual emotion and collective excitement, arguing the following:

Although this high emotional expressivity gives an appearance of disorder, there is today consensus among anthropologists that Pentecostal rituals are strongly organised. Since the word 'ritual' stems from the Latin *ritus* – meaning 'the prescribed order' – this term is meant to define phenomena designed to give sense to chaotic worlds. (p. 54)

These 'strongly organised Pentecostal rituals' must, however, never be arranged in a manner that actively promotes emotionalism. The working of the Holy Spirit and the emphasis on spiritual manifestations are often highly experience-driven. Personal encounters can become the primary measure of truth, diminishing the centrality of Scripture. Spirituality is assessed by the frequency and intensity of one's experiences, rendering the movement susceptible to personality-centred leadership and emotionally charged preachers (Bednicho 2018:8–9). It is not to suggest that emotions and experience are inherently unbiblical. On the contrary, these aspects are fundamental in Pentecostalism, but an appropriate balance is essential. Eriksen (2015:51) notes that Pentecostalism is occasionally viewed to

embody 'caricatures of Pentecostals known for expressive emotionalism, anti-rationality and anti-intellectualism, often emerging from the lower strata of society rather than from the academy or the elite'. However, Nel (2016b:7) contends that contemporary Pentecostalism ought not to be characterised as either wholly anti-intellectual or wholly intellectual, as both tendencies are discernible among Pentecostal communities globally, including within the South African context.

Although Pentecostals are no longer depicted as wholly anti-rational or devoid of intellectual engagement, certain segments within the broader Pentecostal movement are. This is most notable within Neo-Pentecostalism, which continues to exhibit a marked disregard for the rational and intellectual imperatives essential to ecclesial practice and theological discourse. Such tendencies are deeply disheartening as an analysis of contemporary church worship reveals a growing tendency towards emotionalism, with increasingly motivational and psychological preaching, fostering a spirituality that is not centred on God (Banda 2021:6). Brodie (2011:50) contends that emotionalism was already evident within South African Pentecostalism as early as 1975, manifesting notably within the Indian community in KwaZulu-Natal. This expression of emotionalism was characterised by a marked disregard for theological education.

The risk of emotionalism is, however, universal. Cooper (2012) seems to argue this when he states the following:

In the churches where I've conducted fieldwork, services mirror rock-concert settings and emulate Hillsong, Australia's Christian music empire, which is itself reminiscent of Cold Play or similar post-rock groups, but with theologically pointed lyrics intended to draw one into the presence of the Holy Spirit. But the one common denominator between these styles includes the gathered bodies of the congregants. These bodies exploit the music and its influences on the senses and intellect and transcend to levels of heightened religious experience. (p. 1)

Mossière (2011:64) notes the following observation in her case study of Pentecostal churches in Canada: 'The audience's responses increase the quality and intensity of the preacher's performance, which, in turn, induces a more excellent and more enthusiastic collective response'.

Emotionalism, when left unchecked, can therefore prove deleterious, as it may give rise to a loss of restraint and to excesses that render congregants increasingly vulnerable to specific suggestions and external influences. When so-called 'feel-good' messages elevate emotional resonance above bona fide biblical exegesis, they risk fostering 'misreading' of Scripture, thereby potentially prompting individuals to act in ways they might not otherwise within a sound theological framework. The prerogative assumed by certain pastors to originate and declare new insights as prophecy or revelation, which is then subsequently regarded as doctrine (Kgatle & Mofokeng 2019:3), is deeply concerning, especially when it is accompanied by emotionalism, manipulation and abuse.

Moreover, such emotionally charged experiences may create the perception of having encountered a supernatural phenomenon, erroneously attributed to the activity of the Holy Spirit. The operational context of Neo-Pentecostalism may significantly contribute to instances of abuse. Its independence from denominational or formal structures and accountability heightens the imperative for innovation, not merely to survive but to flourish within an intensely competitive environment (Kgatle & Mofokeng 2019:3). Emotionalism may, therefore, function as a powerful mechanism by which congregants are coerced to a perceived experience of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, while being manipulated in the pursuit of a predetermined outcome orchestrated by the pastor.

I strongly disagree with Miller and Strongman (2002:8), who argue that 'emotionalism is foundational for the Pentecostals'. However, the observation made by Mossière (2011:70) in her ethnographic study of Pentecostal worship services is disheartening. She observed that the ritual performance is framed by a potent mechanism designed to evoke intense emotional experiences, thereby engendering a perceived interconnectedness between the individual's body, mind, self and the broader social context, an effect which, while significant, calls for careful discernment.

Okoye (2007:85), in drawing a comparison between Pentecostalism and theatrical performances, highlights the continuity in drama, where both the audience and performers form an inseparable continuum. This ranges from 'those who provide the primary spectacle and initiate action' to those who respond to these actions, creating 'a secondary spectacle' without a clear distinction between performers and non-performers. He contends that this continuity is mirrored in Pentecostalism, where every congregation member is actively engaged physically and emotionally. Physically, individuals participate through various forms of vocal and bodily expression, while emotionally, they experience heightened states, manifested through behaviours such as shouting, weeping, falling, fainting, uncontrolled speech and movement.

Authentic emotions and experiences are powerful mechanisms within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism and have contributed significantly to their dynamic growth. The authentic anointing of the Holy Spirit, coupled with enthusiastic preaching, is also a hallmark of both movements. Mossière (2011:70), however, rightly observes that this form of charismatic authority confers upon leaders the capacity to communicate compelling ideas with a view to captivating and stirring the imagination of individuals.

Within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, preaching is often regarded as unsuccessful and ineffective if it is not accompanied by 'supernatural results'. The expectation placed upon preachers and, for that matter, worship leaders to produce such outcomes can lead to manipulating the preaching and worship context to achieve the desired response. As a result, preachers and worship leaders may employ 'hype' and 'emotionalism' to encourage congregants

to respond to the altar call, as well as techniques such as mass suggestion, excessive noise, heightened activity, disorder, or showmanship to create the impression of experiencing the manifestation of the Spirit (Nel 2017a:287).

I agree with Stewart (2024:2) that worship must be a deliberate act, engaging both intellect and emotion in harmony. At no point should emotions be allowed to overshadow reason. Emotional expression in worship should arise as a response to the intellectual recognition and acceptance of God, his will and his works. When emotions are given precedence, worship ceases to be a heartfelt expression of praise grounded in the truth of God's Word. Instead, it becomes emotionalism, devoid of intellectual and emotional submission to God's will and experiencing the authentic working of the Holy Spirit.

Key aspects of emotionalism within Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal movements can be characterised as a tendency in religious life and worship to prioritise emotional experience, such as feelings of joy, awe, sorrow, or ecstasy, over intellectual or doctrinal precision. The conceptualisation of emotionalism in this context involves formulating a theological defence or critique of these phenomena, particularly where emotional intensity is misidentified as evidence of the authentic work of the Spirit, genuine faith, or spiritual maturity.

Emotionalism can, in conclusion, be characterised by an excessive emphasis on emotional expression as a criterion for spiritual authenticity. It may manifest in exaggerated displays of emotion during worship or preaching, the assessment of one's spiritual state based on emotional expressiveness, and the conflation of emotional intensity with divine presence or approval. Such tendencies risk fostering superficial theology, emotionally manipulative environments, and a form of performance-driven spirituality.

Conclusion

The implications of syncretism suggest that it entails a loss of the 'purity' of religious traditions, potentially compromising the integrity of Christian theology by incorporating non-Christian elements (Marimbe 2024:4). Both the experience of the presence of God and the experience of God's apparent absence are to be understood as distinct forms of religious experience, each bearing theological significance within the broader framework of lived faith (Glaz 2020:577). Within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, there exists a discernible pressure to ensure God's manifest presence and the working of the Holy Spirit. This expectation may sometimes give rise to the fabrication of experiences that lack authenticity, especially when there is the fear that congregants may experience a worship service as bereft of divine presence. Given that Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism intentionally frame their liturgical and homiletic practices as encounters with God, it may be argued that certain leaders resort to emotionalism, whether consciously or not, which, in turn, has become a significant element in the construction of what

might be termed a 'perceived' or 'manufactured' divine presence, owing to the inherently competitive dynamics present within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism in their efforts to attract and retain congregants.

Evidence of this competitive nature is the fact that the Neo-Pentecostal sector is the most business-oriented in terms of its promotion of personalities, programmes and purportedly sacred objects (Kgatle & Mofokeng 2019:3). When emotionalism is fused with the biblical message to secure attendances and church growth, it becomes the breeding ground for abuse and manipulation.

Any teaching, activity or manifestation that does not prioritise the authentic experience of the Holy Spirit cannot be regarded as Pentecostalism. Any appeal to experience requires more than merely some kind of experience; it necessitates the authentic experience itself from which Pentecostalism stems. Vondey (2018:6) rightly asserts: '... for the Pentecostal it is a particular kind of experience – not the idea of experience as such'. It is not simply the concept of experience but a specific kind of experience that constitutes the foundational moment of Pentecostalism. It is the distinct experience, 'the experience of the experience itself', associated with the direct encounter with the Holy Spirit (Vondey 2018:6). The embodied nature of worship and the emphasis on experience and emotions are central to Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal practice.

The syncretistic potential of emotionalism emerges when emotion and experience are subsumed into a hybrid construct subject to manipulation, particularly when such dynamics are exploited by questionable leadership for personal gain. In such instances, emotionalism can be interpreted as syncretism and as such, poses a challenge to Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism. Identifying these practices as syncretic proves to be a complex endeavour, given the ambiguity surrounding the concept of syncretism within scholarly discourse (Marimbe 2024:10). This complexity is further intensified by the hybrid dynamics in which emotion and experience are interwoven with emotionalism. It can, however, be concluded that when leaders, driven by ulterior motives, seek to manufacture the illusion of divine presence by employing emotionalism, fusing it with the biblical message, it constitutes a syncretic challenge to Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism.

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