International Journal of Education, Vocational and Social Science
https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS
E-ISSN : 2963 4954
IJEVSS

Negotiating morality among women in a Pentecostal church: Perspectives through the materialism, hedonism and egoism cycle

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Abstract

Although materialism, hedonism and egoism have been extensively studied in various contexts including within Christianity, they have largely been treated as concepts which exist in isolation. Where a different conceptual focus has been adopted, it has deployed ubuntu as a uniquely African philosophy and moral concept. Equally incisive is scholarship from St Thomas Aquinas and Pope John Paul II which articulates a Theology of the Body as well as scholarship on the Material Values Scale. The contemporary scholarship helps illuminate the moral complexities that Christian women encounter. In this paper, through the perspectives of women at Apostolic Faith Mission church branch located in Sunnyside, Pretoria, I presented a unified conceptual model to reveal the interconnected nature of moral concepts. The women reveal that materialism, hedonism and egoism are variably connected and justified even in instances where they appear incongruent with normative moral positions. The study therefore intervenes in demonstrating the intricate ways in which morality is perceived and navigated by women in the church. Instead of a straitjacketed conception, morals constitute a dynamic area of Christian life.

Keywords: ***MHE Cycle, materialism, egoism, hedonism, Pentecostalism***

Introduction

Materialism, hedonism and egoism have been extensively engaged by Christian philosophers in a broader debate on morality. St Thomas Aquinas for one, has addressed morality in the Christian faith, focusing on the body and its value (Crittenden, 2020). Others scholars (Belk, 1985, 1988; Ger & Belk, 1996) have recently addressed morality with focus on one dimension in materialism while John Paul II (2006) has addressed the body in a renewed focus on a theological

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conception which builds on Aquinas' work. Such broad approaches to morality are largely delved into without situating morality in specific contexts. As a result, the criticism that dominant perspectives have little empirical grounding is one which could garner sympathy from some observers. Perhaps as some intervention, researchers in Africa have intervened through engaging ethics and morality in religion using vernacular concepts as frames for analysis. One such dominant frame is *ubuntu* which is pitched as a prevalent African philosophy, a way of life and a broad moral guide. For Chigangaidze (2021), *ubuntu* represents a way of life as well as system of thought which are both instructive in shaping how disciplines and fields of expertise value others without diminishing the role and value of the self.

In religious scholarship, some of the key focus areas where *ubuntu* has been harnessed include Pentecostalism and morality (Mashau & Kgatle, 2019; Mzondi, 2023), other Christian denominations (Hankela, 2014) and in traditional religion (Banda, 2019). While this dimension introduces a different approach to appreciating morality and ethics using traditional African philosophical frames, it however appears to wholly discard the rich insights of moral philosophy which the classicists have imparted. This paper reverts to moral constructs drawn from classical Greek philosophy and deploys them in an African Pentecostal church to assess how female members of the church perceive morality in their religious contexts. As such, it offers an alternate lens within African religious formations, to the perspectives informed by African traditional philosophy. Besides deploying the classical Greek concepts of materialism, hedonism and egoism, the paper makes a novel contribution by arguing that within the Apostolic Faith Mission Church in Sunnyside Pretoria (AFMS) these concepts do not manifest as wholly isolated but, are understood as interlocking and entwined in some contexts. In addition, the concepts interplay with Christian identities in a way which draws out tensions between the idealised identity, doctrine-informed identity and negotiated identities by the laity. Morality is resultantly attached to how Christian identity is perceived.

To develop the argument, the paper pitches the key contemporary concepts around morality and the debate they have moulded. Thereafter, the research methodology is laid out. A presentation of findings as well as a discussion around them ensue. The conclusions form the paper's final section.

Review of Literature: Conceptual matters

The conceptual frames deployed in this paper include the Theology of the Body (TOB)

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largely as articulated by Pope John Paul II as well as the Materialism Values Scale (MVS), developed by Richins and Dawson (1992). Both frames are deployed to address different moral concepts. They are then critiqued, and an intervention is proposed in a later section of the paper.

The Theology of the Body

In this section of the paper, two established frameworks in the form of the Theology of the Body (TOB) and Materialism Value Scale (MVS) are presented. While they are engaged individually, they are also understood to constitute part of a long-standing debate which attracts a much broader scholarship than the field this paper primarily engages. There are two key thinkers who have advanced the TOB. Petri (2016) argues that St Thomas Aquinas first introduced his thinking around TOB as comprising of a spiritual and corporeal substance. This thinking is also traced by Crittenden (2020) in a detailed text on Aquinas' conception of the body and soul. Importantly, the thinking in Aquinas' TOB as laid out by the scholars suggests that the body and soul are not separate as was the convention during Aquinas' time. TOB was used as a theoretical framework in my study that this paper is drawn from, and by using it, I was able to explore the intersections of faith, human experience, and reason, developing a deeper understanding of the human person and human relationships. St. Thomas Aquinas integrates Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology. He views the body as essential to human nature, asserting that humans are a composite of body and soul (hylomorphism). The soul is the form of the body, and they work together to achieve human functions. For Aquinas, the body is not merely a vessel but an integral part of the human person, necessary for experiencing the world and performing moral actions. He emphasizes that the body is good and created by God, meant to serve a higher purpose in alignment with divine will. Aquinas presents the body and soul as a single substance, rejecting dualism. This union is essential for understanding human nature. The soul is the form of the body, making a person a composite being. Aquinas' approach is holistic, valuing both body and soul. There is no privileging of one at the expense of another. In contrast, Pope John Paul II's conception recognises the sinful nature of the body and advocates for its disciplining and monitoring.

Aquinas emphasizes that the body is inherently good, created by God. It participates in the divine order, and its functions are directed toward achieving moral and spiritual ends. However, Rose (2013) cautions that Aquinas' contribution also recognises the body as the very obstacle that hinders and obstructs a person's progress to God. In this sense, the body is both vital in understanding the Christian being but also to be treated with caution as it is a potential pitfall due

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to its sinful nature.

The second broad conception of TOB emanates from Pope John Paul II's intervention which is inspired by Apostle Paul's teachings in his epistles contained in the New Testament. It is from these biblical texts that Pope John Paul II then expands the ideas concerning the body, in the process also augmenting to the thinking by St Thomas Aquinas. and other contemporary and modern scholars as identified by (Crittenden, 2020; Petri, 2016; Rose, 2013).

Pope John Paul II's conception of the TOB is summarised by Seyfer & Travaline (2008,) as constituting two themes: the "language of the body" and "the body as a gift to others." Principally, this conception is not merely about representation of the body but the identities which form around and on the body. Additionally, although the "body" is used in variable senses in biblical contexts (body of Christ as well as corporeal body), the TOB as articulated by Pope John Paul II is principally a corporeal body. Hence, his concern is on how the physical form bears an identity within religious, broad social, economic and political contexts. Understood in this manner, it is apparent that the concern is over the moral representation of the Christian body.

Besides the two thematic focal areas which Seyfer & Travaline (2008) identify, the TOB as articulated by Pope John Paul II also engages the body as God's Image, the body as the temple of God, the body as a gift to others as well as the language of the body. In sum, the themes suggest the following:

1. Body as God's image - Humans are a part of the natural world, yet distinct from it, and were uniquely fashioned in God's image (Toti, 2008).
2. The body as the temple of the Holy Spirit – in this thematic focus, Christians are construed as a holy temple and a meeting place for heaven and earth; in this sense, no Christian should engage in transgression, including sexual immorality (Bolinger, 2020).
3. The body as a gift to others – in contrast to the self-centred moralism of egoism, Pope John Paul II espoused a framing of the body as communal. Here, Sri et al. (2006) observe that people are generally predisposed to self-giving love, not self-receiving love. As such, they will only find fulfilment when they dedicate themselves to the service of others, as exemplified by the Trinity.
4. The language of the body - According to Seyfer & Travaline (2008), the body expresses the individual and makes the invisible spiritual nature of individuals visible. West (2004) argues that human bodies have a nuptial character in the sense that they have "the capacity to manifest love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and, through this gift, realises

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the purpose of his being and existence." (p.292). To elaborate, this implies that individuals convey their identity through their actions. This theme is an expression of ethical human behaviour, and can be utilised to explore the possibility of materialistic and other tendencies among individuals, aiming to unravel and understand what motivates and triggers such behaviours.

In the two main streams of thought around TOB, the body is privileged as a site for moral contestation and debate. Some scholars are not entirely convinced by the formulation and other aspects of the theology. For example, Senthilkumar et al. (2014) argue that Pope John Paul II's TOB does not yield much value for young people particularly in contemporary times; in addition, besides offering little to them, it may even be antipathetic to their interests. This is especially the case in a context where sexual abstinence is not widely maintained across cultures and celibacy can be construed as out of the norm. The critique is largely motivated by the sexual focus of TOB, which represents a shift in the broad moral teachings particularly contained in Christian faith, where good and bad are more widely presented beyond sexual matters. West (2004) provides a firm rebuttal to the claims that TOB is focused only on sexual matters, contending that Pope John Paul II offers much more than a reflection on sex and married love. The formulation by Pope John Paul II is instead understood as portraying a discovery of the meaning of all existence, the meaning of life. In this sense, the body serves as a container and object on which all of life –at least for each individual– is inscribed. Hence one's body gives a detailed account of the meaning of life with respect to the individual. Interestingly, such thinking risks dragging the discussion down a rabbit hole where Cartesian thinking is invoked (see Hart, 2005 for a brief discussion). To avoid such a problem, the paper notes that in contrast, Gudorf (2007) argues that the Catholic Church's historical and contemporary perspective on human sexuality is insufficient because it does not attempt to make meaning of pleasure. This critique of TOB argues that the emphasis on the relational good, as opposed to the reproductive good of pleasure, is insufficient. Further, Gudorf (2007) argues that the Church should affirm the virtue of enjoyment and incorporate it as a fundamental aspect of marriage. I acknowledge these concerns but argue that the TOB is essential to the analysis of Christian identity distortions because these distortions illustrate how women give themselves to others and acquire meaning in life. Chaberek (2016) identifies the principal critique as one where the TOB presents as a framework for thought but not as a basis on which to build a system of knowledge. This shortcoming forms one of the main criticisms of the theory.

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Ostensibly, some points of confluence emerge where both Aquinas and Pope John Paul II view the body as integral to the human person. Aquinas' hylomorphic understanding aligns with Pope John Paul II's emphasis on the body's role in revealing the person. Both Aquinas and Pope John Paul II offer profound insights into the understanding of the body. Aquinas provides a philosophical and theological foundation that underpins Catholic teachings, while Pope John Paul II expands this framework to address modern existential questions about love, sexuality, and the human person. Their perspectives invite a deeper appreciation of the body's significance in spiritual and moral life, each complementing the other in a rich theological tradition.

Materialism Values Scale (MVS)

For the purpose of attending to materialism, the paper engages (Richins & Dawson, 1992) Material Values Scale (MVS) which was formulated as a measure of materialism among consumers and therefore more aptly framed as a moral measure in commercial contexts. Materialism is therefore conceived of as a value system reflecting the importance that an individual places on acquiring goods and commodities as a means to achieve certain desired outcomes, such as happiness or social status. However, while the scale suggests a measure which is quantitative in form, the focus in this paper is on the premises from which the scale is formulated. The interest in materialism is motivated by how it fits in a religious moral idealism. Given the widely cited biblical verse from 1 Tim 6:10 (NIV), "*For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many grief*s", attitudes towards materialism tend to be widely negative. Yet, Burke & Cooper (2009) highlight its association with hard work and contributions to increased output, firm growth, and employment. In this regard, the aspects with which materialism is associated are not negative but indicate industry and positive increase, although scholars such as Ndubueze (2021) might contest such assertions. In the scale's formulation, there is no particular moral value ascribed to materialism. Instead, Richins & Dawson (1992*) extend their* attention to clarifying three domains which make up the scale:

- achievement (*using possessions to gauge success),*
- *centrality (possession's central role in life), and,*
- *pleasure (belief in possessions leading to happiness).*

Despite the MVS' usefulness in assessing consumer attitudes (Richins, 2004), this paper invokes it as a conceptual tool since it is best suited to capture perspectives of participants in real time.

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Although introduced as detached from the TOB, it is worth noting that Pope John Paul II's thesis statement recognises performative aspects to spirituality (West, 2004) which also are consistent with how Richins & Dawson (1992) have formulated their concept.

Approached from a theological standpoint, materialism closely aligns with prosperity gospel or the health and wealth gospel. This gospel is articulated as one which translates divine blessing to material blessing in a direct relationship between a believer and God (Keener, 2020). The gospel is popular in contexts of economic strain where people seek divine intervention to alleviate their difficult circumstances (Gifford, 1990; Hasu, 2012; Togarasei, 2011; Wariboko, 2012). Unsurprisingly, some critics argue that prosperity theology can be manipulative, resulting in the poor and vulnerable people giving to religious organizations in the hope of receiving material blessings (Onwu, 2006; Swoboda, 2015). In South Africa, such incidents have been critiqued by theologians and anthropologists of note (Kgatle, 2017; Resane, 2020; van Wyk, 2015). They also contend that it oversimplifies complex issues of faith and spirituality. As such, within Christianity and particularly among Pentecostal scholarship, materialism is approached with some concern and stern criticism especially where it is couched as an extension of prosperity theology.

METHODS

The paper draws from an exploratory qualitative study which employed a mix of data instrumentation tools. Semi-structured questions as well as a focus group discussion were principal instruments used in the study. Women who were members of the AFMS were purposively selected to participate in the production of data. This paper, which is drawn from a broader research project making up the author's graduate project, focused on women in the church because much scholarship does not focus on women in particular to address their perspectives on morality.

Analytically, the study conceived of the TOB as engaging egoism and hedonism. This represents a broad extension of the scholarship showing treatment of the concepts (Crisp, 2006; Hills, 2010)as well as an approach consistent with recent scholarship on Pentecostals and morality (Nyamugama & Nkomazana, 2024).

Research findings

The following sub-sections present the research findings. Three perspectives from the study are presented as part of the empirical data on materialism, hedonism and egoism. They are

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then complicated through a discussion which introduces an analytical frame in the materialism, hedonism and egoism cycle.

Church pedagogies on egoism

A useful way in which to understand egoism was through church teachings. In this segment, perspectives from participants on church teachings on egoism are presented. During a focus group discussion, one participant mentioned that *"there are efforts from the church to teach women"* about *"pride and self-centeredness"*. Another participant added that "*there are teachings in AFMS concerning matters in pride and self-centeredness*", particularly "*in B and C groups that host meetings with the women*". Evidently, there is a deliberate effort to teach members on projection and identity of the self. The church's relational approach to teaching on egoism is particularly interesting because it highlights the balance between acknowledging individual identity and maintaining a focus on communal ties. The church makes efforts to address pride and self-centeredness in a way that aligns with the spiritual development of its members. Moreover, while broad teachings are held, it is important to note that the participants indicated that within specific women's groups, teachings focused on specific gendered identities and roles. Additionally, they stated that the church provided gender-neutral sermons, thereby promoting a more harmonious and fulfilling community environment.

On pleasure

Hedonism is especially focused on the pursuit of pleasure, which dovetails with some of Pope John Paul II's perspective. In the pope's conception, pleasure especially of a sexual nature is deemed in positive light so long it is situated within the institution of marriage. Participants engaged questions on hedonism with one participant indicating that *"women who are past 30 years and have been hoping to get married for a long time tend to change priorities from just marriage to just having their own children".* The intimation here is that due to the pressures of what one may refer to as a biological clock, some women upon going past the age of 30 opt to neglect the chastity code and strive to meet and satisfy cultural and biological roles of procreation. In the process, they also satisfy themselves as complete beings within the socio-cultural milieus that they reside. The cultural demands contrast with broad Christian values that emphasise marriage first (Kogan & Weißmann, 2020). The shift in priorities also aligns with egoism as it reflects a desire for personal happiness and fulfilment at the expense of Christian values and

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norms.

Besides cultural and biological demands, the question of hedonism also invoked dynamics related to social demands and realities particularly in urban contexts. In such conditions, Christians face the tensions of living morally upright lives amid the prevalent allures of sexual participation which are rife in contemporary urban lifestyles, where western culture is widespread. For example, one participant stated that women "*are abstaining even though they are in relationships but there are those who do not abstain* [from sexual intimacy]" while another indicated that "*it has become a norm that women can live with men even if they are not married*". In both instances, the desire to access sexual pleasure and quite possibly the benefits of male companionship override normative Christian identity and values (Kolman, 2018). Understood via Pope John Paul II's TOB, the body is placed in positions of compromise which are antithetical to how it ideally should be. Yet as the participants in the study revealed, there was often a rationale to why some moral codes are avoided in some contexts.

On materialism

While egoism and hedonism have been approached via Pope John Paul II's conceptual frames, materialism is approached via the Material Values Scale (MVS). Many women in the study perceived wealth and financial stability as crucial goals and indicators of satisfaction in life. In other words, it was a means to an end as well as an end for some. The latter position was however discouraged in the church pedagogy. For instance, one participant indicated that "*we believe in prosperity and the blessings of God are usually reflected by possessions as well*", a perspective which indicates that accumulation of wealth and possessions is part of God's plan and should be embraced without guilt. Such ideas indicate clear recognition by members of the importance of prosperity and material possessions. According to the Material Values Scale (MVS), this perspective aligns with the notion that wealth and material goods are indicators of success (Stivers, 2023), well-being, and divine blessings. There were equally some existential and psychological attractions to pursuing wealth and materials. These were reflected in statements such as "*once they are wealthy or financially stable then they have come to satisfaction*" and *"as in the olden days women used to be dependent to their husband*". Such perspectives indicate an astute recognition that women in the church are embracing a shift in societal values (Adebayo, 2019; Inglehart, 2018).

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Consistent with the claims that consumerism is a dominant cultural aspect particularly in western society as well as societies exposed to western culture, the Material Values Scale posits that materialism is a prevailing value in contemporary culture. Perspectives from the women indicate that materialism was valued but not necessarily in the same sense as the scholarship on contemporary culture might suggest. Among the women in the study, materialism was valued for its overt and material signification of divine touch. In other words, it was especially worthwhile for its value in revealing that God was actively making an impact on the lives of born-again members. Of course, there were additional justifications for pursuing materialism such as demands of everyday contemporary life. However, these complemented the theological rationale given by members. The words of two members particularly make this point vivid: one member noted on accumulating wealth, "*using that money, provide,* [I can] *be a servant outside to God's children through my finances"* while another emphasised that "*God wants us to have money otherwise it will end up in the hands of people who aren't born again-they will do things such as child trafficking, drugs*". These statements risk conflating material wealth with moral righteousness, potentially undermining the core Christian values of humility and selflessness by suggesting that financial prosperity inherently leads to ethical outcomes.

The materialism, hedonism and egoism cycle

The findings have so far reflected on the TOB as a conceptual framework as well as the MVS. While these frames have certainly been useful and invaluable in making sense of the contributions by participants, they also reveal a shortcoming in deploying them as isolated tools which do little more than speak at each other. In recognition of the limitations of singular tools, the paper advances a more robust analytical frame in the form of the materialism-hedonism-egoism cycle –MHE cycle– (see Figure 1 below). The cycle underscores the importance of interconnected moral choices in promoting holistic well-being and a closer relationship with God.

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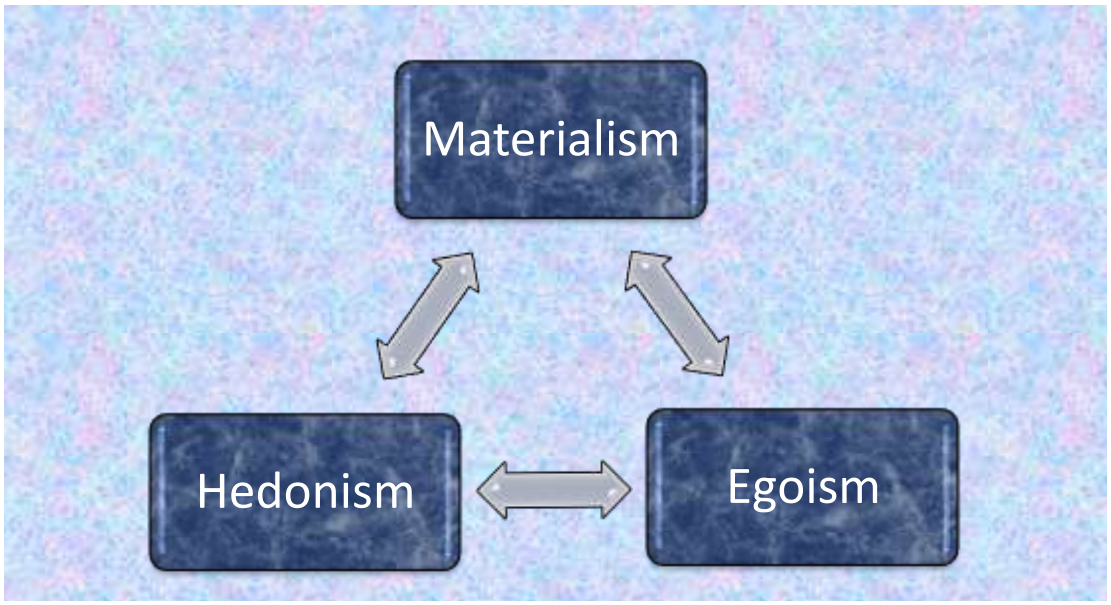


Figure 1: The Materialism-Hedonism-Egoism Cycle

The study recognises that materialism is related to self-valuation, identity, and worth. Equally important is that egoism is tied to hedonistic pursuits and also dovetails with materialism. In this sense, materialism, hedonism and egoism converge in variable ways for the women at AFMS. Through three windows from data gathered during the broader study, the women have highlighted the importance of teachings on egoism in their lives, the ways in which hedonism is pursued in the area of sexual pleasure or intimacy as well as the complex relationship that they have with materialism. The three windows have helped unravel a moral complication in the form of how some ostensibly questionable, if not undesirable moral positions become justified and tied to other forms of morality. The MHE cycle adds conceptual complexity and clarity on the moral issues attended to in the paper. It augments to the scholarship which has so far been concerned with singular moral lens such as egoism (Arkush, 1991; Gates, 2013; Knox, 2016) and hedonism (Huta, 2015; Migone, 2007). The cycle adds texture to thinking around moralism in the sense that it merges established concepts into a coherent yet possibly unsettled concept.

In light of the findings presented above, materialism, hedonism and egoism were recognised in the contributions of the women, sometimes with either one or two of the concepts featuring on the periphery. For example, some women noted that egoism and hedonism may have been manifest but also indicated that materialism existed in moderation and in some instances

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for good cause. In a setting where more than one moral concept was recognised, the distortion of Christian identities was not always clear cut as some moral concerns which would appear antithetical to Pentecostal and Christian lifestyles were deemed morally justifiable by the women. A similar logic played out with respect to materialism where in some instances members opted to see the justification of divine provision in the process of accumulation instead of recounting the moral cautions on love for money and possessions found in the bible.

CONCLUSIONS

What does a Christian identity look like? What do lived realities and perspectives of women in the church suggest a Christian identity actually is? How do moral frames help us understand what Christian identities look like? Such questions have been teased out in the paper, focusing on three moral constructs as an underlying thread. Through materialism, hedonism and egoism, the paper has considered perspectives of women at AFMS The paper recognises that while the participants pursued materialism, hedonism and egoism, they also offered justifications for their moral choices that were consistent and connected, linking one moral choice to another. For this reason, a composite concept was propounded in the paper to reveal the interconnected ties of moral dimensions and reveal how members perceive their moral choices. The paper notes that there is a subtle normalisation of behaviours that are not aligned to Christian values and ethical considerations in contemporary Pentecostalism. In a society where women are objectified, leading them to becoming overtly obsessed and pre- occupied with their bodies' shapes, size and sexual appeal, it is imperative that the Church adopts innovative and effective strategies in its discipleship efforts towards women.

In summary, the paper's findings augment to the empirical body of knowledge offering a nuanced understanding of ego, pleasure and materialism. It spotlights the interplay between altruism and egoism, communal practices and isolation, and inclusive values and exclusions, which all offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of human behaviour and its connection to pride and self-centeredness.

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