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Women And Morality In Pentecostalism: Perspectives On Egoism In Afm's Pretoria Church

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Abstract

This article attends to the continued silence over the perspectives of followers on morality which persists particularly concerning women. The insights of women are especially salient given the participation of women in Pentecostal churches as well as the incidents of abuse largely orchestrated by male leaders. Despite the sparse attention afforded to ethics and morality in contemporary Pentecostal practice, moral complexities animate the arena largely drawn from Biblical teachings and church guidance. The paper discusses women's perceptions of one such moral question via egoism. Egoism has roots in classical Greek philosophy and although dated, continues to serve as a useful framework in which to think about morality. Drawing from the perceptions of women at a Pretoria-based church branch of the Apostolic Faith Mission, the paper suggests that egoism was generally understood as reprehensible. However, away from idealised moral injunctions, egoism is more complexly engaged by the female members, with secrecy forming one mechanism of retaining egoism albeit away from the collegial gaze. The article adds to an empirical gap while setting up a puzzle in the scholarship of how Pentecostals moralize their daily lives.

Keywords: ***Pentecostalism, Egoism, Sacro-egoism, AFM, South Africa.***

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Pentecostalism in South Africa has witnessed public incidents which have either stirred controversy, stirred researchers, or drawn the attention of state authorities. Among these are eating of grass, petrol consumption, miracle money, exposure to venomous snakes, nudity, and sexual acts in the presence of supposedly anointed men of God. Such activities, which range from the miraculous to the mystical, are religious responses to the pressures of late

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capitalism and exclusion in the neoliberal project (Comaroff 2014). Other analyses plainly recognise the activities as a fourth wave of Pentecostalism which is characterised by morally dubious practice especially on the part of religious entrepreneurs (Kgatle 2017; 2020). In all this public and scholarly debate, the public perception and identity of the churches are either tainted or become fodder for ridicule. Moreover, while the rich body of scholarship adds impetus on analyses which scrutinise the form and character of Pentecostalism in Africa, I suggest that continued silence over the moral hue **of followers** persists particularly concerning women. As already stated, the activities in some churches have included denuding the laity, in many instances particularly targeting women. Under such circumstances, previous analyses suggest that the laity are largely subjects at the mercy of powerful leaders. In many instances, leaders involved are male and they play the role of powerful and in some instances, abusive leaders (Casciano 2022). Moreover, followers tend to be predominantly women and although there is a dynamic and more progressive inclusion of women in church hierarchies, many women nonetheless remain in the broad membership where they might not wield authority in the church pedagogies and proceedings. In this sense, despite the sparse attention afforded to ethics and morality in contemporary Pentecostal practice, it is clear that moral complexities animate the arena. An exploratory study of women in one church location sets the tone for a reconsideration of the agency that women have in these religious configurations. Drawing from egoism as a moral and conceptual frame, this paper reorients analysis to the position of women in Pentecostal settings. It attends to the question, does egoism have a possible distorting influence on women's Christian identity? In addressing this question, the paper considers the moral position of women in a Pentecostal church, a direction which sets the tone for considering women's perspectives and practices in these contemporary churches.

Egoism forms the fulcrum around which the paper is conceptually organised. Within religious scholarship, egoism has been variably treated as the brief conceptual section below will reveal. Suffice to note that having noted that human action is largely motivated by egoism, Max Stirner 1995 cited in Jenkins 2009 then adds that,

> Even religion, therefore, is founded on our egoism and – exploits it; calculated for our desires, it stifles many others for the sake of one. This then gives the phenomenon of cheated egoism, where I satisfy, not myself, but one of my desires, such as the impulse toward blessedness. (Stirner 1995 cited in Jenkins, 2009, 244).

If egoism is indeed a primal moral inclination both for individuals and religion, what then is the

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position of the identity of religions which by and large claim a broader, utilitarian value. The following sections discuss egoism in light of women at the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa's church branch in Sunnyside, Pretoria (hereafter AFMS). The arrangement of the discussion is as follows: the next section presents the context in which the discussion is made. This is followed by a conceptual discussion, giving the paper a scholarly context in which its discussion is emplaced. Thereafter, a sketch of research methods is presented before an empirical section outlines what the women at AFMS revealed, coupled with a discussion. Thereafter, conclusions are made.

A review of literature: Pentecostalism and morality in South Africa

South Africa is a country with a vibrant tradition of religious participation particularly in Christianity and Pentecostalism (Anderson 2006; Asamoah-Gyadu 2018). With ties to the expansion after the Azusa revival, churches such as Apostolic Faith Mission are well-connected to the seismic shift which has featured on the global religious terrain. Yet questions of morality in the Pentecostal church continue to constitute a peripheral theme in the scholarship, often addressed in discussions of other broader themes. For example, in recent years, miracles and questionable acts have drawn out moral examinations from researchers whose responses have ranged from characterisation (Kgatle 2020) to stern criticism (Kgatle 2021; Resane 2020).

Sociologists and anthropologists have for some time been fascinated by Pentecostalism in South Africa. Ilana van Wyk (2020) for example has discussed the intersection of Pentecostal public (re)presentation of Pentecostal prophets in South African politics. The political arena in recent times has been animated by allegations of corruption, pilferage, and other forms of unethical conduct. In particular, during Jacob Zuma's presidency (van Wyk 2019), the ties between politics and Pentecostal religion appeared very close. Yet, Pentecostalism has not only featured prominently in the public moral gaze but is equally vibrant in the socio-economic domain. In social and economic spheres, two themes are predominant: health and wealth. Concerning health, some researchers have focused on sex in a context where single members seek companionship amidst a pernicious HIV/AIDS pandemic (Burchardt 2011; 2015; Frahm-Arp 2012). Researchers focusing on wealth critique the persistent demands of some Pentecostals who seek offerings, seeding and a transactional interaction with God in anticipation of divine blessings (Banda 2019; Resane 2020; van Wyk 2014).

In the scholarship discussed so far, I wish to highlight a persistent focus which although enriching, also points to an empirical deficiency in light of moral discussions around

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Pentecostalism in South Africa. The first is that much focus on Pentecostalism is not precisely around morality although hints are made. The few exceptions which deploy moral lens are sympathetic to African philosophy principally via *ubuntu* (Mzondi 2022) and often are studies not confined to Pentecostalism (Hankela 2014; Mashau and Kgatle 2019). A recent intervention made by Mzondi (2023) points to ubuntu's function in entrenching syncretism in the Apostolic Faith Mission and subsequent breakaway churches, while Nyamugama and Nkomazana (2024) have recently focused on the intersection of hedonism and Christian values. This paper augments to the empirical college by deploying egoism as an equally salient concept within the Pentecostalism and morality discussion particularly on the African continent. The second area of enrichment is in providing a gendered focus where the roles and perspectives of members and followers are considered. If insights are to be gleaned from focusing on single people (Frahm-Arp 2012) and young members (Burchardt 2011), then a gendered lens enriches the nuanced analyses in the scholarship. This gendered perspective is nonetheless rooted in egoism as a moral and philosophical concept.

Egoism

Egoism is a philosophical moral concept whose tradition draws from classical Greece. At its core, egoism claims that individuals act solely in their self-perceived self-interest, seeking to maximise their own predicted utility (Schmid 2010). In this sense, individuals do not act principally for the benefit of others but for the ultimate goal of satisfying self-interest. The act of assisting others may therefore be understood as egoistic if its underlying motivation is the need to satisfy one's personal interests (Salmieri 2016). The crude reading of egoism as purely self-oriented might mislead readers to think that personal interest is pursued at whatever cost. This is not the case. As Rachels (2013) has meticulously demonstrated, ethical egoism does not adopt an unfettered quest to satisfy the self. Rather it is tampered or mediated by recognition of other people's interests as well. This is a form of egoism which largely applies in practice as individuals recognise that there are bounds to which one can pursue self-interests. Within Christianity, Gates (2013) attends to ethical egoism largely from a theological perspective. In other words, focus is on what the gospel reveals and not how members and followers of the religion behave and what they think. This paper makes an intervention in this scholarship on morality by interrogating self-reported perceptions of women in a Pentecostal church.

Approached from a theological perspective, Debeljak & Krkač (2008) add that egoism and

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pride are symptoms and feelings of inadequacy and self-contempt, a position around which Cooper (2003) urges counsellors and ministers to be less direct and confrontational and more "delicate" with their sermons so as not to further wound the egoist's already wounded soul. Such encouragement hints at a broader ethics of care in Christianity, an ethics which hints at a shift from egoistic morals to broader communitarian, collective and utilitarian mores. As such, concerning individuals in Pentecostalism, the theological bases for morality include:

> *"Honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself" - Mtt 19:19 (NIV)*
> *"And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself."" - Mtt 22:39 (NIV)*
> *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves." - Phil 2:3 (NIV)*
> *""For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."" - Gal 5:14 (NIV)*

The above moral inscriptions appear as stark contrasts to the egoism which has been sketched so far. Instead of self-interest underpinning social and religious fraternity, love for the next person is key. It is portrayed as fundamental to formation of the model believer who is not egoistic but concerned with the collective good. In this sense, utilitarianism appears to dominate as a philosophy relevant for religion, a moral philosophy requiring stern criticism (Burgess-Jackson 2013) in light of egoism. An alternative to utilitarianism which dominates contemporary African moral philosophy is *ubuntu/hunhu* which privileges the collective ahead of the individual (Chigangaidze 2021). Despite these apparent alternatives, scholars of religion who have engaged egoism such as Arkush (1991) maintain that despite the suggestion of collective good, egoism prevails as an underlying moral code. As such, egoism appears to be a moral concept demanding serious attention (Burgess-Jackson 2013) and of great practical value especially in contexts where a romantic communitarian view prevails. Unsurprisingly therefore, new concepts which hinge on egoism have emerged in recent years.

In more recent scholarship, Knox (2008, 2016) has proffered 'sacro-egoism' as a concept which helps account for the emergence of a radical expression of individualized faith among Christians in the West. Although the context is markedly different from Pentecostals in South Africa, behaviours and morality are not necessarily so despite notions of *ubuntu/hunhu* or collective social values. Even more extreme is scholarship which argues, much like Stirner cited in

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Jenkins (2009), that egoism is steeped within religious fields where divine egoism (Mohler, Jr 2009) features. All the debate around morality in Christianity constitutes a widely discussed area on morality in religion. Here, Garfield et al. (2015) refer to moral psychology and its usefulness among spiritually active members of Buddhism.

RESEARCH METHODS

The paper draws on data extracted in a qualitative study focusing on Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa's Sunnyside, Pretoria branch. In this sense, the study was principally a single-case, case study following (Yin 2003). The study attended to perceptions of female members of the church. their insights were shared via semi-structured interviews as well as a focus group discussion. Deploying these methods and research instruments means that instead of assuming a positivist paradigm, the study hinged on interpretivism. As scholars such as (Creswell 2014) have observed, interpretive researchers may adopt an intersubjective epistemology which entails that reality is socially created. The thinking in their perspective is that reality is comprised of the subjective perspectives of individuals on the external world. For the researcher, intersubjectivity then plays out via the observer-observed, researcher-researched relationship. Although such a relationship is not always clearly distinguished, there is a dominant feature of intersubjectivity which is worth noting since the researcher monitors, interacts with and engages the researched and attempts to make meaning out of them. Some form of interpretation is made in observing and interacting with participants especially when analyses are done. For the purposes of this paper, the analytical frames chosen harnessed the concepts from hedonism, materialism and egoism which also proved to be vital in the categorisation of codes.

The coding process relied on processing of raw data into codes which were generated either as blocks of text representing a code or as selected terms from the text. In conducting such work, research ethics were particularly considered in the areas of informed consent, research permission, privacy and confidentiality as well as participants' anonymity. Sensitivity to such issues stemmed from the researcher's own duty to care for participants as well as strict ethical requirements of the University of Botswana.

Egoism and Christian identity at AFMS

Before detailing the aspects which three participants referred to in interviews and the focus group discussion, it is important to be acquainted with AFM's broad theological position and

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the groups which focus on women in the church.

Members of the AFM are expected to live their lives based on their confession of faith and unwavering belief in God the eternal, almighty creator, ruler of all creation, and author of their salvation (AFM-SA 2016). They are expected to "be born again" (John 3:3), be baptised in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), belong to an AFM assembly, and adhere to the "confession of faith and pronouncements" of the AFM-SA (2016, p.8.2). Indeed, in Pentecostalism the term “born again” holds significant theological importance and is widely understood as a transformative spiritual experience. It is understood as a conscious decision that one makes to acknowledge their sinfulness, repent and turn away from their sin, leading to a renewed relationship with God. Among Pentecostals, the term “born again” is not a physical rebirth, but it refers to a spiritual rebirth which then implies that the individual goes through a process of an internal conversion, a change of heart, new desires to shun away from sin and begin showcasing the traits and qualities of one who has embraced and assumed a spiritual rebirth guided by the Holy Spirit. This shift reflects a deep spiritual awakening and a renewed commitment to living a life aligned with the teachings of the Christian faith.

Much like other Pentecostal churches, the AFM believe in the Holy Spirit as “true God proceeding from the Father and the Son, who convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgement and leads in all truth” (Apostolic Faith of South Africa, n.d.). To be considered a bona fide born-again, one must then be subjected to baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit which amounts to subjecting oneself to full immersion in the Body of Christ. Ancillary qualities include manifest works of the Spirit which show in the conduct and performances of the born-again believer, all made possible by the Holy Spirit. The implication is that once a person is born again, then their life in Christ is fundamentally dependent on the ongoing work and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The mind and the intellect are not disregarded, but are seen as secondary to the guidance provided by The Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14-15). In addition, the Holy Spirit serves as a moral compass and guide for believers, convicting them of wrongdoing, and directing them towards righteousness and truth. These justifications and belief systems apply to all such that women at AFMS are expected to understand and embrace the baptism of the Holy Spirit for establishing and maintaining their Christian identity, empowering them to fully live out their faith.

The AFM-SA (2016) constitution includes confessions of faith and pronouncements that outline the core beliefs of the church. These typically encompass:

- God the Father, the son Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit,

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- the Bible as the Word of God,
- all humans are created in the image of God and this image is marred through sin,
- the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues,
- Jesus as the Head of the Church which constitutes born again Christians,
- baptism by immersion in water and that Christ will come back to take away His Church,
- that a day of judgement will come for both the living and the dead.

Furthermore, the AFM-SA (2016) encourages the enforcement of the following values among its members: integrity, respect, accountability, transparency, and leadership. Some of the structures which facilitate community among women in the church include the National Sisters' Fellowship, Woman of Excellence, and Breakfast with Girlfriends in Christ. In particular, the National Sisters' Fellowship is structured as one of the church's five main departments (AFM 2016, p.8). Through annual conferences, special weekends, and prayer days, this women's department promotes a Christ-centred character among all women within and outside the AFMS by emphasizing prayer, fellowship, and spiritual growth (AFM-SA 2016). In addition, according to AFM-SA (2016, para 8.1c), the National Sisters' Fellowship is the primary platform for women of all ages. Other groups making up the ladies' fellowship are the "Woman of Essence" –which targets younger women in the church and meets once per month–, and the Breakfast with Girlfriends in Christ (BGC) (Mmope 2023). Three areas in which egoism is addressed around the church are discussed below. They are presented and discussed in a general societal sense as well as in terms of egoism among members within the church.

General societal perceptions

Among some of the issues which emerged from the data were general societal perceptions of what egoism represents and how it is understood. Speaking on this, one participant noted that,

> Pride is a personal thing. Because of city lives women especially with resources have pride and most are self-centred. Some are just Sunday attenders and do not find time to be involved in ministry and helping of the needy or getting to know the status of other people in the society (Participant 5).

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Here, pride is understood as personal, attached particularly to women in the city who have accumulated resources. This reading of pride as egoistic is consistent with Baek & Yoon's (2022) suggestion that pride is consistent with egoism while gratitude signifies altruism. City life in this instance refers to life in urban areas where the pressures to get by are immense. Although Pentecostal theologies allow members to lay claim to success and the material signs of accumulation (Anderson 1987; van Wyk 2015; Wariboko 2012), the ability to accumulate and demonstrate these material progressions are often difficult for all within urban settings. Where a few accumulate signs of wealth, celebration of such may be construed as pride and this is understood as a trait of egoism.

According to Hills (2010), there are two key strands of egoism, namely, psychological egoism and rational egoism. Psychological egoism claims that each person always does act in her own interests while rational egoism suggests that each person has reason to act in her own interest. This portrayal offers an interesting scenario considering the participant's contribution above. In a religion where shows of success are encouraged as markers of divine blessing, the suggestion about the city women who show off what they have can be defended via rational egoism. They have earned their assets/resources and within Pentecostal framings, are showcasing the blessings that they have amassed. Nonetheless, Sauchelli (2022) observes that as a moral frame, rational egoism is deemed immoral by other scholars. As such, it is morally contentious within Christian religious settings.

Egoism and sexual desire

Sex is a particularly sensitive area in Pentecostal lives as it is considered sinful when engaged outside of marriage. Yet, in the urban settings where many believers exist, sexual activity is widely practised in by both believers and non-believers. As such the temptations and allure of sexual gratification are immense. In the study's context, sexual activity outside marriage is not just an act of sin but also constitutes a potentially malignant biophysical health risk. HIV/AIDS has been widely studied in South Africa (Adogame 2007; Khumalo et al. 2020) where prevalence rates are among the highest in the world. It is commonly known that engaging in risky sexual behaviour increases the likelihood of contracting HIV. In this sense, the self-centred act of pursuing gratification of one's sexual desires can have life-long health implications besides negating one's chances of having eternal life. One participant in the discussions referred to the sexual activities of her friend and how they suggested self-interest even after attempts to offer counsel.

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I have a family friend, she doesn't talk, she does things in secret because she has a child. She's disabled and she has a child. So, at some point I had problems with going to school because of my eyes so I spent a lot of time with her then. So, what I would see is I would find used condoms around and I would try to talk to her to ask how are you feeling, what's happening and then she goes to hide but when you hear around, they tell you that during the day the father of that house comes to visit her. but with her she doesn't talk because I would tell her, I'm a girl, tell me what's happening how are you feeling but she would say no i don't do that then when you go there, she's cleaning the condoms because she knows I'm coming (Focus Group).

The extract describes a complex and disturbing but common phenomenon. Navigating the conflict between their actions and their faith, for some Pentecostals, sexual engagement is then practised either in secrecy or under some variably justified terms (Burchardt 2011; Kgalemang 2014). For the participant referenced above, her friend's engagement in sex was shrouded in secrecy despite the two enjoying close friendship. The need to satisfy the pleasures and demands of the flesh superseded the friendship between the two. In flagging the shared identity that the two had as "girls", the participant's attempt appears to have been centred on highlighting that they also shared similar pressures and desires. Sharing in these experiences should have been a remedy against pursuing one's own personal gratification. However, the friend seems to have been focused on satisfying her sexual needs.

Interestingly, the extract also hints at a potentially exploitative relationship. According to the extract rumours suggest that the "father of that house" visited the participant's friend during the day, raising concerns that he might have been taking advantage of her vulnerability as a disabled woman. Her disability possibly limited her ability to consent freely to his sexual advances, seek help or communicate openly about her experiences. In this context, the man was possibly pursuing self-gratification and the convenience of a secret sexual relationship, disregarding long-term consequences for both parties. Such circumstances are notably prevalent in South Africa, particularly involving wealthy or powerful older men and vulnerable women that are impoverished, unemployed and so forth. This can be interpreted as egoistic tendencies among marginalised Christian women, where the urgent desire to alleviate poverty, loneliness and other negative conditions may overshadow their commitment to moral principles. This reflects a psychological egoism perspective, where self- interest drive

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behaviour, even if they are acting for altruistic reasons.

Writing in the context of Benin, Quiroz (2016) makes note of the complex ties between morality and Pentecostal religiosity. In short, the moral lines are not always clear cut as people find ways to make-do with their religion in their specific contexts. Egoism as a moral concept attached to Kantian thinking suggests that one is drawn to pursue self-interest if the justification for such a pursuit is rationally sensible. In the case of the participant's friend above, the gratification of sexual needs was morally right to her so long as she did it clandestinely. Secrecy became her mechanism to hide the transgression away from those who could possibly be offended. In this manner egoism can be seen as a driving for secret illicit sexual relationships, thereby being repressive according to Christian principles. The repressive nature of such relations is that they frequently involve deceit, manipulation and exploitation, perpetuation cycles of emotional and social harm. Individuals facing significant socio-economic and emotional challenges may resort to morally questionable behaviours as a survival strategy. This phenomenon is common in various contexts where economic or emotional desperation can be a cause and/or symptom of egoism, leading to the compromise of Christian values.

Pedagogy

Church pedagogy was a cornerstone of how egoism was understood by members. Teachings were drawn particularly from the Bible as well as from interactions during women's group meetings and sessions. One participant's contribution is instructive in gaining grasp of how teachings on egoism were structured.

> *Our church is doing very well to make sure that all women are taught ways of behaving more especially those that are in leadership positions so to get everybody involved more especially in the church matters hence self-centredness can discourage others to get involved in church activities (Participant 8).*

Two key aspects to egoism are addressed in the participants extract above. The first ties to egoism as a behavioural issue which attracts teachings for correction particularly among all women and people in leadership positions. The second suggests that egoism has a disruptive effect on the broader membership of the church. Egoism is a foil against the morally upright way women of God ought to live and function in the church. It must therefore be taught about and addressed for all women and for those in leadership, in order to avoid tainting the rest of the church. Approached in this manner, egoism has no place in the church.

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Biblical injunctions address the importance of restraining inordinate personal desires, as indulging them can lead to sinful behaviour. Hence despite one's desire to engage in sex with other persons, it is clear that one must be committed to the sanctity of marriage (Gen 2:24; Mark 10:6-9). Such teachings are the basis of church guidance around morality and they are complemented with teachings from the New Testament. The injunction against sex outside of marriage and its related principles can be examined through the lens of egoism, particularly focusing on how egoistic motivations intersect with moral and religious teachings. Egoism in the context of this paper reads as individuals that act in ways that maximize their own self-interest at the expense of Biblical injunctions. For instance, engaging in sex outside of marriage might provide immediate gratification, but it can have negative long-term consequences such as unwanted pregnancies, emotional distress, relational instability, sexually transmitted diseases, and societal judgement. Biblical injunction align with a perspective that prioritizes overall well-being over immediate pleasures that could be detrimental. This perspective is anti-egoism in that it values long-term wellbeing over short-term gratification. It reflects a commitment to values and principles that consider the impact of one's actions, in favour of actions that lead to greater spiritual and personal growth.

In this sense, the ideal notions of morality among Christians are clear. Any behaviour which transgresses this, amounts to sin which is abhorrent in the religious community. Notably, the injunctions do not apply to the self alone but are equally valid where groups and collectives are in breach. Hence, although the dyadic distinction of Jews and Gentiles is dispensed of in the New Testament, Pentecostals maintain a distinct awareness of born-agains and unbelievers. This distinction reflects their theological focus on personal spiritual experience and renewal.

CONCLUSIONS

The empirical gap pertaining to women's perspectives on morality in Pentecostal churches has been addressed via a discussion of women at the AFMS. Although recent scholarship which invokes morality has deployed ubuntu, this paper has engaged the scholarship through egoism, a concept drawn from classical Greek philosophy and with a wealth of attention in the European renaissance via the likes of Immanuel Kant. The paper revealed that women in the church consider egoism largely as problematic in a general sense. To avoid disrupting colleagues, forms of behavioural moderation such as secrecy are employed. The church itself maintains teachings of what a morally upright individual should be, largely drawing from the Bible and its constitution.

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