


# Pentecostalism and heteronormative God-talk in modern South Africa: A decolonial approach

**Author:**Themba Shingange<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**<sup>1</sup>College of Human Sciences, Institute for Gender Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Themba Shingange,  
shingt@unisa.ac.za**Dates:**

Received: 03 Nov. 2022

Accepted: 23 Feb. 2023

Published: 18 Apr. 2023

**How to cite this article:**Shingange, T., 2023, 'African Pentecostalism and heteronormative God-talk in modern South Africa: A decolonial approach', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2763. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2763>**Copyright:**© 2023. The Author.  
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This article reflects on the use of heteronormative God-talk within African Pentecostalism in modern South Africa. God-talk has often been used as a tool to push specific socio-political ideologies within the global community and in discourses about gender and sexuality. In Africa, these discourses are often characterised by debates and influenced by normative, moral religious and Christian views. Research indicates that African Pentecostalism is one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in the world and it has great influence on sexual moral discourses. The advent of neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa was marked with the abuse of God-talk. Different media platforms reported on the commercialisation and abuse of religion as Pentecostal prophets used God-talk often disguised as prophecy to perform unusual practices and to make religious remarks regarding gender identities and sexualities. This forced and reinforced the hegemony of heterosexuality in society. Therefore, the decolonial motif was applied in this article to reflect on the coloniality of power embodied in God-talk. Decoloniality can be a tool that can reveal both the liberating and oppressive elements in the use of God-talk in South Africa.

**Intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary implications:** The decolonial move here was motivated by the progressive post-heteronormative South African paradigm. The article used the interdisciplinary approach, namely socio-political sciences and Missiology to challenge the abuse of God-talk within contemporary Pentecostalism in South Africa. Positive use of God-talk can liberate both the church and society by transforming the traditional heteronormative views and by empowering congregants irrespective of their gender or sexuality. Such transformation can be possible if post-heteronormativity can be embraced by both church and society.

**Keywords:** heteronormativity; God-talk; decolonial; post-heteronormativity; African Pentecostalism.

## Introduction

The use of God-talk is common in global socio-political spaces where certain agendas are pushed at all costs. These tendencies are prevalent in America where political leaders use God-talk to lure voters (Djupe & Califano 2009, 2013). This strategy is also common locally and abroad in religious and Christian spaces. Christian leaders often use religious cues in their language, sermons, announcements and altar calls to force and reinforce certain religious beliefs, practices including safeguarding the hegemony of heteronormative sexualities (Manyonganise 2020:51; Zhou & Landa 2020:375). This is often performed to present heterosexuality as a superior identity and other gender identities as inferior and ungodly.

Maduro (2009:26) laments that patriarchy, colonialism, racism and other social and historical forms of domination and exploitation such as heteronormativity have influenced our conception of God, Jesus, and the Church. The hegemony of heterosexuality in Christian spaces has taken the same domineering route; this is demonstrated by how Christian leaders control sexuality by imposing the bourgeoisies of the secular family, that is the heterosexual monogamous marriage (Mignolo 2008:15). This model is presented as a standard of human sexual relations. It also places heterosexuality as the universal model established by God (Mignolo 2008:15). This (ab)use of power further makes congregants not to have freedom to question what is said by pastors about gender and sexuality in the pulpit as pastors' utterances are considered sacred and holy (Zhou & Landa 2020:376). God is, then, regularly portrayed in the pulpit as having an interest in heterosexual behaviours and practices of the citizens while abhorring those who identify with non-normative sexualities. Therefore, Maduro (2009:20) calls for a liberation theological self-criticism that can challenge those who uphold marginalising tendencies by considering any departure from dominant theology as mistaken and sinful to mend their way.

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In this article, the author reflects on the use of heteronormative God-talk among African Pentecostal Christians in South Africa (Christians, henceforth). This might sound controversial because African Pentecostalism is commonly known for its emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit (pneumatocentric) and its fundamentalism on gender and sexuality issues (Anderson 2003; Gabaitse 2020; Saayman 1993). Therefore, the subject of gender and sexuality might be hurriedly rendered irrelevant in this context. On the contrary, discourses about gender and sexuality have always been part of African Christianity although in most cases it happened covertly. This happens because Africans in general and Christians often approach these subjects with tabooing and privacy. Manyonganise (2020:58) observes that remarks related to sex and sexuality are constantly passed in the pulpit within neo-Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, messages about sex are explicit in the sermons of some of these Pentecostal churches (Manyonganise 2020:60). Although this observation was made in Zimbabwe, the same is also true within the South African Pentecostal terrains.

## Methodology

In this article the author followed the desktop research approach to investigate the phenomenon. Desktop research in this context entailed the use of secondary data and sources of information that do not involve fieldwork. This article adopted a pragmatic approach, particularly the focused mapping review and synthesis (FMRS) method, which is believed to have four essential components. This article focuses on the three, i.e., it examines the topic within a broader epistemological context and focuses on a defined field of knowledge rather than a body of evidence; it creates a descriptive map or topography of key features of research within the field rather than a synthesis of findings; it comments on the overall approach to knowledge production rather than the state of the evidence (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2019:453).

## Theoretical framework

The author used the decolonial motif as espoused by Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2013) and Grosfoguel (2011:1) as a theoretical point of departure in this discussion. However, the author focused on the coloniality of power that seeks to control gender and sexuality (Mignolo 2008:15) as a theoretical framework underlying the arguments presented in this article. The history of sexuality in Africa is interlinked to the colonial and missionary eras, hence the need to decolonise the narrative (Manyonganise 2020:53; ed. Tamale 2011a: 15–16). Power dynamics in this context are demonstrated in those who use the pulpit to decide for everyone what is sexually acceptable. These tendencies are also manifested in the silencing of those who are deemed to be different; in this case, people practising same-sex activities. It is my view that the decolonial motif can perhaps help in revealing the liberating aspects of God-talk while exposing and transforming the oppressive elements of heteronormativity within African Pentecostalism.

## Aims and objectives

The article examines the impact of the progressive post-heteronormative South African paradigm in transforming heteronormative God-talk. It is important to highlight that the reference to the current South African socio-political landscape is not an attempt to place society before and above the church. Nevertheless, it is my view that Christians and society have a responsibility and potentiality to learn and to influence each other positively. This influence can contribute in transforming the current use of God-talk. It can also reaffirm those who identify with non-heterosexuality and other gender identities such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, intersex, and gender nonconforming persons (LGBTI+ henceforth) that they are not aliens in the household of God (eds. Germond & De Grunchy 1997).

The author would like to make it clear from the onset that the article addresses the subject that is interlinked to homosexuality; however, the focus of this article is on heteronormativity, not on homosexuality and its moral and religious debates. Thus, the article is not about what is commonly known as 'the homosexuality problem' (Masango 2002:956–972; Ratele 2011:412). However, the author views the ideology of presenting homosexuality as a problem to be another way of forcing the hegemony of heteronormativity embedded in the misconception that God favours heterosexuals and hates those who are not. Therefore, the concept of heteronormative God-talk needs to be addressed to dismantle erroneous perceptions about God and Christianity.

## Heteronormative God-talk

The term 'heteronormative God-talk' is used in this article to set a tone for the subject under discussion. Heteronormativity depicts the prevalent privilege of heterosexuality in society. This phenomenon is presented by those in power as an invisible force that is an integral aspect of social, secular, and religious institutions perpetuated through several discursive and discourses (Zhou & Landa 2020:377). These discourses include God-talk that demonises other gender identities and sexualities. It often manifests and is presented by pastors in the pulpit and other platforms. Heteronormative God-talk aims to bluntly force and reinforce the hegemony of heterosexuality and to render other gender identities and sexualities as abnormal, unnatural, un-Christian, and as un-African, a position espoused by most African Christian leaders (Van Klinken 2015:19).

Some prophets, pastors, teachers, bishops, men and women of God use the pulpit to convey discriminating and sometimes derogatory messages about non-normative genders and sexualities. However, these messages often lack in-depth biblical exposition and contextualisation of the subject. Again, these messages fail to project the love of God for all irrespective of sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, these cohorts also fail to comprehend the repercussions of their messages on the lives of those already made vulnerable by homophobia in society. Maduro

observes that the myriad conflicts and contrasts prevalent in the workplace, sexual, cultural, linguistic, dogmatic, educational, political, and religious aspects of the subaltern's lives have been disregarded (Maduro 2009:21).

Against this backdrop, society forgets all the oppressive dimensions and conflicts already suffered by the sexually marginalised and further adds misery to the lives of LGBTI+ by alienating them even in the household of God. Society accomplishes this by taking messages against LGBTI+ from the pulpit as inherently indisputable and infallible Word of God, thus putting these messages into practice. It is my view that this position represents the legacies of missionary and colonial power imbalances, which are embedded in the polarisations of superiority–inferiority, right–wrong, good–evil, and Christian–unchristian, the list is endless. Therefore, there is an urgent need to decolonise the heteronormative God-talk to present Christianity as welcoming to all.

The reason for decolonising heteronormative God-talk is that it projects the views, wishes and perceptions of individual Christian leaders, although often supported by the masses. The author concurs with Maduro that, the appearance of universal truth in these dominant theologies (heteronormative God-talk) is merely an expression of the needs and privileges of the elites in power, usually constituted by adult, urban, heterosexual Christian male pastors. It is the authors view that individual Christians and society are influenced and coerced to a cordial agreement regarding the hegemony of heterosexuality. This is demonstrated, among others, by the current history of sexualities in Africa that is constructed and portrayed in heteronormative terms.

### Heterosexuality as a norm in Africa

The initially written records about African sexualities are important in understanding the current South African narrative. These records were archived by the colonial explorers and missionaries who crisscrossed the continent in the latter half of the 19th century (ed. Tamale 2011a:14). Stories on these records show how heteronormativity was constructed by missionaries and how sexuality was narrated from colonial and missionaries' perspectives. These stories enabled the adage that homosexuality did not exist in Africa during the pre-missionary era to be popular in Africa. However, this narrative was disputed by scholars, such as Niehaus (2009:85–111) who argued that LGBTI+ existed in Africa including South Africa even before the coming of the European missionaries. Again, Mudimbe opines that paradoxically, missionaries were also the best representation of the colonial enterprise because they gave their all to the objectives of colonialism, which were the spread of Christianity, the advancement of culture, and development (Mudimbe 1998:47).

Therefore, the motives behind the missionary and colonial agendas were ambiguous. The author therefore concurs with Mbabazi (2020:347) that as genders and sexualities continue to be rigorously debated in secular and religious spaces in both

local and global spaces; the missionary's overtone is traceable in these debates that are indisputably influenced by the missionary-colonial constructed sexual discourses. This is true as Peyrefitte and Sanders-McDonagh 2018: 325–326 observe that others who do not conform to heteropatriarchal norms are singled out and positioned as a challenge to the existing masculine and heteronormative social order. This narrative is also true even within the South African context.

Therefore, in Africa, the debates about sexualities are fundamentally based on religious and biblical inclinations. The role played by missionaries and their literal interpretation of the Bible to define what was morally correct still has an impact on today's society and that is observable in the populist use of God-talk to discredit other sexualities. Mothoagae and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2021:2) notice that the dichotomisation of religion and the use of Christianity and Bible as an imperial and colonial vehicle to convert, civilise and colonise black bodies in South Africa is a problem.

The views espoused by Mothoagae and Mavhandu- Mudzusi here attest that the Bible has been consciously used as an oppressive tool in Africa, although there are other liberative elements found in the same Bible. Therefore, African traditional religions and African ethics were eroded by the romanticisation and well-acclaimed superiority of Christianity. Contemporary African traditional views on sexuality are thus, colonised. Although religion permeates every aspect of life, Christianity has managed to overshadow the unique nuisances of African cultures, sexualities, religiosity, and Pentecostalism. Their uniqueness marked by Africanism and the spirit of *Ubuntu* loosely translated as [humanness] are trivialised and often pushed to the peripheries. *Ubuntu* in a way discourages heteronormativity because of the adage 'I am because you are' (Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho 2008); therefore, in this regard, the LGBTI+ coexist with the rest of the community.

However, Antonio (1997:302) cautions that, ideally, Africa is often defined as one single entity shared by the entire continent. The truth is that each African context presents diverse realities. However, gender and sexualities, particularly same-sex relationships have always been marked by heated debates driven by the common assertion that homosexuality was imported from Europe to Africa by missionaries and colonial administrators (Msimbi 2011:69). Nevertheless, the changes in the South African socio-political landscape have presented some new dynamics worth noting. As much as gender and sexualities are now openly discussed in schools and media platforms, the subject is still regarded as taboo, especially within Christian spaces.

### The new dispensation in South Africa

In 1994, the dawn of democracy in South Africa brought significant changes to society's discourses about other sexualities and gender identities that are not heterosexually inclined. This should not be construed to mean that South Africa has finally achieved complete freedom in matters of

LGBTI+. According to Robertson (2017), inquiries such as the survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2015 established that the country is not exempt from the dominant sexual discourse characterising the rest of Africa. Again, the same findings demonstrated how religious beliefs and attitudes continue to sustain patriarchal as well as heteronormative norms and values in South Africa.

In essence, heteronormativity is still rampant in different structures of South African society. However, what is commendable is that the post-heteronormative agenda has begun to be part of different structures of society. This is different from the past apartheid era where the subject entirely treated as a taboo. The beginning of talks that challenge heteronormativity in the general society also presented an opportunity to begin transforming heteronormative God-talk that is still dominating religious and Christian spaces. It is the authors view that the current South African socio-political landscape suggests a paradigm shift for every structure in the society to move into a post-heteronormative epoch. This epoch is characterised by the move from the traditional narrative that was marked by God-talk supporting heteronormativity to a new all embracing paradigm. This need for a paradigm shift was also identified by Masango (2002:956) when claiming that, the church in Africa is going through the process of purification, brought by the new challenge posed by globalisation.

There is enough scholarly evidence suggesting that the move to put the past behind us and usher in the new age has been made, even though there was no official announcement to impose this new regime. Some outstanding South African figures who publicly opposed the heteronormative paradigm helped to usher in this age. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, the late former president of South Africa's democratic regime, met with LGBT activists and later backed their cause. Similar to this, the late Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu took a public stand in favour of LGBTI+ issues (Tutu 1997:ix). He achieved this by claiming that the struggle against homophobia is the next moral crusade following the defeat of apartheid (Tutu 1997:ix).

Since South Africa's first democratic regime took office in 1994, a new moral crusade has indeed begun. The inclusion of freedom-related concepts in the constitution that forbid discrimination against persons based on their race, gender, and sexual orientation was one of the most recent progressive advancements. This modification was officially implemented in 1997 after being accepted in the new constitution in 1996 (Posel 2011:131; Schäfer & Range 2014:11). As a result, the South African parliament approved the *Same-Sex Civil Union Act* in 2006. Following the legalisation of same-sex unions, heterosexual couples no longer hold exclusive access to certain benefits and previously denied to same-sex couples. These changes heralded the beginning of the post-heteronormative paradigm period. Hence, these new changes and realities brought about by globalisation challenge Christians to transform their views on same-sex practices in addition to others (Kruger and Van der Merve 2017:6).

## The reactions of African Christian leaders

The reactions of Christian leaders to the new developments that accept same-sex relationships display the complexity of the hegemonic position of heteronormativity in South African Christian spaces. Pentecostalism in the developing countries is known for its proclamation of a pragmatic gospel that tackles practical needs such as sickness, poverty, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits, and sorcery (Anderson 1999:229). Therefore, it is lamentable, that challenging heteronormativity is not yet part of Pentecostal agenda. Indeed, African Christian still after leaders regard people practicing same-sex as being demon-possessed (Kaoma 2014:6). Again, Leburu et al. (2022:41) find that most church leaders perceive LGBTIQ+ as people who are possessed by evil spirits, thus requiring deliverance. These religious constellations argue that there are no examples of homosexual marriages in the Bible. Indisputably, most Christian leaders in South Africa are still caught up in the heteronormative God-talk narrative.

The views espoused by these Christian leaders are also characterised by populist assertions claiming that homosexuality is demonic, un-African and un-Christian (Van Klinken 2015:19). Another example of this populism used in God-talk is the saying that 'when God created humans, he made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve' (Kaoma 2014:1; Owino 2020:338). Such rhetoric gives pastors and church leaders an opportunity to take advantage of the pulpit. The leader of the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), Reverend Kenneth Meshoe, is one of the South African Christian leaders who has been identified with heteronormative God-talk. His comments about God can be seen as compelling and supporting heteronormativity in churches and society. Adultery, sexual immorality, and homosexuality, according to Meshoe, are grievous crimes in God's eyes because they are defiling God's marriage order between a man and a woman. Meshoe passed these remarks as he lamented the passing of the *Civil Union Act* (Quintal 2006).

Meshoe's emphasis on the defilement of marriage relationship between a man and a woman implied that same-sex intimate relationships were outside God's order of marriage. Again, the statement echoed the sentiments of the colonial-missionary paradigm that used God-talk to emphasise the binaries of man and woman, boys, and girls, and males and females its disapproval of all other sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions (SOGIE). This narrative is also embedded in the heteronormative view that places the rest of genders and sexualities outside the framework of heterosexuality as defiant and pathological (ed. Tamale 2011c:640).

## South African Pentecostalism in perspective

In South Africa, Pentecostalism is growing at a faster pace (Anderson 2000:30). The term South African Pentecostalism is inclusive of what Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019:3) call, the Andersonian perspective that consists of three sub-traditions,



namely the denominationally based Pentecostalism associated with western Pentecostalism, African indigenous Pentecostalism, and neo-Pentecostalism. The other important category of this movement is the charismatic form, which is also marked by fundamental growth in South Africa (Anderson 2004:233). The three largest denominational-based Pentecostal churches are the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM), the Assemblies of God (AOG) and the Full Gospel Church (Anderson 2004:2). The Zion Christian Church (ZCC) founded by St Engenas Lekganyane in Morija, Polokwane is the largest African Indigenous Pentecostal church in South Africa (Anderson 2000:68). On the other hand, neo-Pentecostal churches include Rabboni Centre Ministries led by Pastor Daniel Lesego, End Time Disciples Ministries led by Prophet Penuel Mnguni, Mount Zion General Assembly (MZGA) led by Pastor Lethebo Rabalago, and Incredible Happenings Church led by Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng (Kgatle 2017:3). Furthermore, examples of charismatic churches are Rhema Bible Church in Randburg and Grace Bible Church (GBC) in Soweto, South Africa (Anderson 2004:10–12; Sewapa 2020).

The advent of neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic has led to the mushrooming of new churches and to the exodus of members from mainline churches to join them (Masenya 2005:36). These exoduses and the populism of charismatic churches in South Africa contributed, among others, to African Pentecostalism gradually becoming the largest and fastest growing movements in Africa (Anderson 2005:233). On the other hand, the recent developments brought by new Pentecostalism are worth noting. Pentecostal pastors, commonly called 'prophets' within these new churches became notorious for unusual practices where they made their followers drink petrol and eat grass and snakes, among others (Kgatle 2017). This led to the investigation by the Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities (CRL) Rights Commission on the commercialisation of religion and abuse of people's belief systems. The practices have also caused the CRL Rights Commission to ask if religion should be regulated in South Africa (Kgatle 2017:1). Furthermore, these unusual practices were somewhat motivated by God-talk. This was demonstrated by congregants who gullibly follow what is uttered by pastors without interrogating the validity and the source of the messages. However, God-talk within African Pentecostalism is not exclusively connected to unusual practices; it is further used to disregard LGBTI+ within these spaces and society (Asamoah-Gyadu 2020: ix).

### Heteronormative God-talk within African Pentecostalism

The jovial applause by an estimated 15 000 congregants to the homophobic remarks made by the Ghanaian bishop Dag Heward-Mills while visiting the GBC in 2017 remains symbolic. The bishop remarked during his sermon that same-sex relationships were so unnatural that even animals did not engage in them (Ndzwayiba & Steyn 2018:394). The bishop said The bishop further said that you can not have male and male engaging in an intimate relationship, just as you

will not find two male dogs, two male lions, two male impalas, two male lizards, and two male elephants doing the same, Sewapa (2020:282). According to the bishop same-gender attraction was unnatural because it has no counterpart in nature (Sewapa 2020:282).

Congregants applauded after the bishop's remarks and that led the famous South African radio, television presenter and choreographer, Somizi Mhlongo to walk out whilst the bishop was still preaching (Leburu et al. 2017:1; Dayile 2017). It is my view that the remarks and the applause by the congregants represented the hegemony of heteronormativity within African Christianity. Similar explicit heteronormativity is found in stories of most LGBTI+ who either decided to leave the church or continue to remain there but suffer in silence. Sewapa (2020:285) observes these scenarios from his rural Limpopo province where dominating, hegemonic, patriarchal and heterosexual cultural ideologies still dominate. He heard many sermons in his local churches, including Pentecostal and Zionist churches both in rural and urban areas, being delivered from heterosexist theological views that mainly condemned and excluded those members who did not conform to the heterosexual norm (Sewapa 2020:285).

This hegemony is driven, among other things, by Christians who endorse God-talk that perpetuates the ostracisation of non-heterosexual people in church and society. Owino (2020:340) observes that the rhetoric that drives God-talk can be detected in the adage 'God loves the sinner but abhors sin'; this implies, therefore, that in this context, God loves a homosexual person but hates homosexuality. Moreover, Christianity has become a dominant religion in the region to an extent that it influences society and its leaders with issues regarding morality and sexuality. Therefore, gender and sexuality are defined in Christian terms. Thus, the remarkable growth of African Pentecostalism has an impact on society's views including those related to sex, gender and sexuality (Anderson 2003, 2004:242). The use and abuse of the pulpit through God-talk is often disguised as prophecy to influence what society considers as right or wrong sexual and gender practices. God-talk has had a dichotomous implication of being liberating and oppressive in the lives of marginalised sexual minorities. If it is liberative if it promotes the love of God irrespective of gender and sexuality. However, it is oppressive if it continues to reinforce the hegemonic position of heteronormativity to the detriment of LGBTI+ and the bewilderment of society.

### God-talk and prophecy

Kgatle (2019) observes with concern that with the growth of Pentecostalism, Christians are failing to differentiate between biblical prophecy and divination. Indeed, similar confusion exists between prophecy and God-talk. Shingange 2021 observes that the confusion within African Pentecostalism happens because of lack of discernment of spirits. On the other hand, Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019) reckon that the same challenge is caused by the contradictions between Scripture,

prophecy and the revealed truth that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The existing confusion has been demonstrated by the hype of news on different media platforms about the use and abuse of prophetism. Several stories showed that Christians willingly complied with every instruction given by the prophets in the pulpit even if they are misinterpreting scriptures. This is because prophecy is regarded with high esteem within African Pentecostalism. This is demonstrated by cheerful responses from congregants whenever Pentecostal prophets are ministering in the pulpit even if they are misinterpreting scriptures. These prophets commonly utter words such as 'Can I prophecy?' and such words are met with jovial exclamations like 'go dipper papa', 'prophecy men or woman of God', 'I receive it', among others. Thus, the words of the prophets are regarded as an infallible voice of God within these spaces. Madipoane Masenya coming from a Pentecostal church notes how prophecy is received within African Pentecostalism when she posited:

In these settings, prophecy is encountered regularly in the form of sermons, teachings, and so forth. The preachers and teachers are believed, just in the case of Biblical prophets, to be speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God, proclaiming the Word of God to the people. It is no wonder that at the end of the (*molaetsa*) sermon, a thanksgiving prayer is usually said to thank God for having spoken to the church through the preacher/prophet(ess). (Masenya 2005:36, 38)

The given citation depicts the high level at which utterances made in the pulpit are regarded as God's commandments. Again, these utterances are further received with gullibility and non-scrutiny; congregants carry these utterances to society as the inspired word of that should be obeyed. The behaviours and perceptions of members of society are therefore, influenced by the words of the prophets. However, prophets do not only utter words about healing, and hope for prosperity as observed earlier; they also speak about moral issues regarding relationships, marriages, sex, sexualities, and gender identities. Because of this, heteronormative God-talk has become more common in these settings. Germond and De Gruchy (1997:3) bemoan the way that most Christians force people who engage in same-sex behaviour to hide who they are, leading them to begin to question their connection with God. So, it becomes difficult for ordinary people to reject or disagree with words uttered in the pulpit. For these followers, all words from the pulpit are prophetic and should be received without questioning. Therefore, there is a need for the construction of a new narrative that can transform the current heteronormative God-talk. The relevance of heteronormative God-talk must be questioned especially in the new democratic South African dispensation. This dispensation has not only presented opportunities for socio-political activism but also for religion and Christianity to transform.

## A decolonial post-heteronormative Christian praxis

The envisaged Christian praxis entails the constant interrogation of Christian reflection and practice. Christians must continuously bring their reflections and actions under

scrutiny to discard what is no longer relevant and to promote good practices. The decoloniality motif, which refers to challenging of powers, and conceptions of knowledge that encourage the replication of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies, was the starting point the move to develop a decolonial post-heteronormative Christian praxis (Maldonado-Torres 2007:243).

The envisaged post-heteronormative Christian praxis seeks to challenge powers and conceptions embedded in the hegemonic position of heterosexuality in South African Pentecostalism. It also seeks to dismantle powers that give heteronormative God-talk a ground to flourish within Christian spaces. The praxis further problematises the use of God-talk in the pulpit to discriminate against those who deemed different based on their gender and sexual orientation. However, changing church constitutions and policies might not necessarily bring the much-desired outcome. This is evidenced by the progressive post-heteronormative move made in South Africa that has that has not yet transformed transformed people's perceptions even after the passing of the *Civil Union Act*. The author concurs with Robertson that the heteronormative traditions, theologies, readings, and rituals that make up the institution's life are not necessarily affected although that particular institution may alter its doctrines and rules to accommodate same-sex partnerships (Robertson 2017:138).

Therefore, the move to transform the current heteronormative God-talk goes beyond mere policy changing; it calls Christians to reflect, challenge and reconstruct the use of God-talk in the pulpit. This reconstruction must redefine the pulpit as a platform to advocate for God's love for all irrespective of gender and sexuality. This move is congruent with Kgatle and Mofokeng's (2019) assertion that by embracing the decolonial hermeneutic of experience, Pentecostal Christians will be celebrating the diversities that were previously regarded as a threat. It is my view that this will also mean celebrating the diversity of gender and sexual diversities, which have challenged Christians for ages.

In the same vein, South African gay friendly churches have already established a pattern that other Pentecostal churches might follow when repurposing their places of worship. Stuart (1997:78–79) lists multiple instances demonstrating that the majority of South African Christians had a negative view of same-sex behaviours. Yet, by offering LGBTI+ people safer places to worship, groups such as the Gay Christian Community Church (GCC) and the Deo Gloria Family Church have chosen a different direction. Other African Pentecostal churches can begin posing issues with heteronormativity in their communities. To change the current heteronormative God-talk that harms LGBTI+ people, something should be done. Yet, African Pentecostal Christians should accept this change while upholding the core beliefs of their religion.

This move can transform the current heteronormative God-talk and replace it with messages that are non-judgemental but promote the grace and love of God for all creation. This

can be fulfilled if Christians can start demonstrating through positive God-talk that God's love, mercy, peace, justice, and respect are meant for all persons irrespective of gender or sexuality (eds. Samuel & Sugden 2009:115).

This action might be seen as a response to Antonio's (1997:302) call for change, in which he posited that rather than asking if homosexuality was un-African or un-Christian, Christians should start asking what answers they should make in the face of its actuality. The constant and friendly link between God-talk and the dominant heteronormativity shown in the church and society is challenged and dismantled by this move. The abuses committed in the name of God can further and exposed, demolished, named and shamed by changing the way we talk about God. Instead, it should be stated that regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, God loves everyone and that everyone belongs to the church of God through their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This move is critical given the numerous reports of news flooding different media platforms and social media spaces of LGBTI+ who are ostracised, humiliated and murdered just because of being deemed different by a society, which is in a way influenced by heteronormative God-talk. Indeed, heteronormativity is still a great challenge that needs to be dealt with in South Africa to ensure that the new dispensation brings the utopia of post-heteronormativity and to finally uproot the hegemonic position of heteronormative God-talk within African Pentecostal Christian churches.

## Conclusion

God-talk has been often used by politicians to lure voters into the American socio-political terrains. In Africa where Christianity is a dominant religion, God-talk is used in moral issues to convince society to follow a certain direction. Again, in the South African context, the use of God-talk is also prevalent within African Pentecostal Christianity. This use of God-talk within these spaces is sometimes questionable. Pentecostal Christians have been recently in the news for what has come to be known as 'unusual practices within neo-Pentecostalism'; God-talk in this context has been used to make congregants eat grass, snakes, and drink petrol, among others. However, this has not been the only use of God-talk; it is further used to force and reinforce the hegemonic position of heterosexuality in both church and society.

This article has used the term 'heteronormative God-talk' to describe these tendencies. The use of God-talk in this manner was further problematised, and it was demonstrated that this use has its roots in colonialism, hence the use of the decolonial motif was considered to address this challenge. The new South African socio-political landscape poses a challenge to heteronormativity. This new dispensation is marked with pluriverse gender identities and sexualities. It is now apparent that the legacies of colonial-missionary rule cannot be allowed to prevail any longer. Therefore, the colonial use

of power to control sexualities needs to be challenged and African Pentecostal Christians are challenged to reflect and do self-criticism regarding this matter. This act can perhaps bring the utopia of transformation in the society and church. Therefore, the need for a decolonial post-heteronormative paradigm remains critical and the current narrative still needs to be challenged and uprooted to the core.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Hlaviso Muhlaka for language editing.

## Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

## Author's contributions

T.S. is the sole author of this article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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