


Response of public theology to the voices of the voiceless in pluralistic South Africa

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This article identifies public theology as reflective endeavours and tasks of the Christian community seeking to address the societal ills and concerns. The aim of public theology is to bring hope to the culture that is increasingly cynical about common human future. The historical sketch of South Africa since 1994 as a secular state helps to understand the impact of pluralistic ideology in formulating the laws of the land. In many cases, these laws are at loggerhead with the needs of the masses who become unheard and unseen. The current status quo in hierarchies of societies had become a concern to be addressed from theological perspectives. *Realpolitik* had become elevated and *vox populi* become relegated. It is herein argued that the Christian faith in South Africa is silenced by the powers of secularism and majoritarianism within the civil structures. The role of public theology is explored and expanded to include uniqueness, prophetic role, critical role and public initiatives that lift up the dignity of humanity in the face of pluralistic influences. The call is made for theology to enter the journey of transition from stoical passiveness towards communal, formative, critical and public activism as demonstration of the love of Christ incarnate. Parochialism and defeatism are not the ideal options for the public theology. As an epistemological discipline, an appeal is made for theology to become significantly and visibly public in civil matters despite the pluralistic penchants and predilections.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article challenges public theology to take a lead in addressing human misery in pluralistic society of South Africa.

Keywords: politics; public; theology; prophetic; power; voice; discourse; pluralism; secularism.

Introduction

Public theology is always public, speaking in public places and addressing the public issues for the sake or benefit of the public interest. After 1994, South Africa, as a new democratic state, had to reposition herself for the new dispensation that is underlined by inclusivism, secularism, multiculturalism and unitarism. Discrimination based on race, colour, sexuality and ethnicity had to be repealed or annulled in all constitutional dictates. It was accepted that societal diversity is a motif in the multicultural composition of the citizenry. A theory that advocates a unified and centralised system of government had to be explored. These steps were inevitable as diversity in all its forms was a reality on the socio-religious landscape. Social illnesses bred by prejudices were abundant and became a concern for those in the public service hierarchy. The country was and still is engulfed with racism, bigotry, sexism and economic imbalances. The pluralistic ideology takes a lead in formulating public policies and the statutory laws. The majority of the ruling party (African National Congress) ensured that some bills are passed to become the acts that make up the constitutional legitimacy. Two examples to be cited to this effect include *Termination of Pregnancy Act* (1996), which governs abortion, and *Civil Union Act* (2006), which legalised same-sex marriages. These and some legislations are regarded by the religious part of the populace as theologically erroneous and biblically blasphemous. The politics of power (*realpolitik*) are elevated, while the voices of the masses (*vox populi*) are relegated. It is this situation that has created the need for the emergence of vociferous public theology. Theological discourse is what public theology does to create and usher in an ideal ambience where citizens feel safe. That is the rationale behind Kusmierz and Cochrane's (2013) assertion that:

Theological discourse is governed by new motifs: reconstruction, democratisation and social transformation shape the agenda, while 'the public' and civil society have been newly identified as relevant to the church. (p. 85)

The reality faced by theology in South Africa is that national affairs had taken a different turn. Christian theology is no more protected by the state. Christian theology is suffering the

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consequences of its historical role of legitimising the status quo by supporting and defending unjust racial policies.

Christianity silenced by secularism?

According to Statistics South Africa,¹ Christianity is the dominant religion in South Africa, with almost 80% of the population in 2001 professing to be Christian. No single denomination predominates, with mainstream Protestant churches, Pentecostal Churches, African Initiated Churches (AIC) and the Catholic Church all having significant numbers of adherents. This means South Africa is generally a religious state. It is also observed that South African Parliament is made up of the majority of religious people, with Christians making a highest component in most, if not all the parties. Kotzé and Loubser's (2017) research helps us to understand this:

Despite the large number of Catholic and AIC Christians to be found among the public, the Protestant religion still dominates among South Africa's parliamentary leaders. Protestant elites have increased in proportion from 65% in 2006 to 77% in 2013. Catholics now comprise 10% of elites as opposed to 14% in 2006. Proportionally speaking there are also fewer non-religious people among the elite sample in 2013: 14% instead of 21%. (p. 2)

The question that bombards South African populace is: 'Why Christians in civil service, especially in parliament, are not vocal enough to exert influence as a way of abating "ungodly" behaviours and laws?' Christianity seems to be silent or passive in the public space. The prophetic voice in South African public space is deafeningly silent. Public theology seems to be conspicuous by its silence in the public arena of South African human affairs. Secularism, which is marked by indifference to, or rejection or exclusion of, religion and religious considerations, seems to have captured the minds. Secularism has asserted the right to be free from religious rule and teachings. South Africa has moved away from the Christian political theology of apartheid to an explicitly secular legal and political regime. This process of secularisation has brought South Africa into par with the majority of national polities around the world (Leatt 2007:29). I mentioned somewhere else that (Resane 2016):

1994 is universally celebrated as the year of liberation – the death of apartheid as a legislative policy. There was a rekindled hope of the nation entering the Promised Land after years of slavery and wilderness wanderings. The secular state under African National Congress emerged. The new constitution of 1996 acknowledged the religious plurality of the country's populace. Many clergy such as Dutch Reformed Alan Boesak, Catholic Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, Presbyterian Makhenkesi Stofile, Methodist Mvume Dandala, Baptist Peter Marais, Pentecostal Frank Chikane; and many theologians such as Dr Motsoko Pheko, the Anglican Dr Siphon Mzimela, Stanley Mogoba; and others joined the civil service. These Christian leaders, some of them being systematic theologians, joined the government to its highest echelons. Regardless of their presence and position, *Ichabod* started to surface: secularism engrossed itself constitutionally in the hearts of the nationals. Morality was pushed to the furthest corners of social conscience. (p. 3)

1. https://www.google.com/search?q=S.A+Statistics+Religion&rlz=1C1GGRV_enZA786ZA786&oq=S.A+Statistics+Religion&aqs=chrome..69i57.14097j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (visited 18 April 2019).

The politics of power (*realpolitik*) had taken a centre stage, where the voices of the masses (*vox populi*) are ignored. Consultations with the masses regarding the new bills are a norm, but the raised concerns are ignored by the lawmakers in the chambers of statutory vetoes – in this case, the parliament and the National Council of Provinces. The bottom line is that South Africa is now a pluralistic state, with a constitution that promotes the ideals of secularism, humanism and freedom of choice (Smit 2007):

The new Constitution describes South Africa as one sovereign, democratic state founded on the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality and advancement of human rights and freedoms; non-racialism and non-sexism; supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law; and universal adult suffrage, a national common voters roll, regular elections, and a multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness. (p. 23)

Theology has been muzzled and the public is left in the cold. The voice of God is unheard of in the public debates. The prevailing worldview is that *vox populi* is not *vox dei* any longer. The voices of the people are no more the voice of God. If it is there, it is ignored and disregarded as an *acedia* (sloth) of some sort. The Christian influence in South African civilian affairs had diminished. Secularism and majoritarianism within the civil structures reign supreme and justify and empower civil authorities to pass laws and policies that are anti-theistic and anti-human dignity.

The role of public theology

It is of great importance to note the historical evolution of the concept 'public theology'. In the United States, the concept was popularised by theologians such as Martin Marty, David Tracy, Robert Thiemann and Max Stackhouse. In Europe, it was brought to the surface by a German theologian, Wolfgang Huber, through his scholarly work, *Kirche und Öffentlichkeit* (Huber 1973, 1991). Here in South Africa, gratitude is paid to Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (BNC), based at University of Stellenbosch. Some South African theologians who ran at the forefront to introduce public theology include the likes of Ernst Conradie, Bernard Lategan, Nico Koopman and Dirkie Smit. Their main objective was to conceptualise and describe the role of the church and theology in the post-apartheid context (Kusmierz 2016:4). Tshaka (2014:4) goes into the details that public theology has become the buzz word in South Africa; it has become a buzz word in some Princeton circles as well as in some circles in Brazil. A book edited by Joel Carpenter of Calvin College with the title, *Walking together: Christian thinking and public life in South Africa*, is dedicated to three South African public theologians: John De Gruchy, Nico Koopman and Tinyiko Maluleke (Carpenter 2012:i). It is a theology done for a particular people, and it is from a specific social location, therefore can rightly be called contextual theology (Wells, Quash & Eklund 2017:167). Public theology is an alternative theological imagination, one which envisions the Christian life as participation in Christ and humanity that is disadvantaged by secular and inhumane systems.

The role of public theology in South African context is highlighted and captured by Kusmierz's (2016) definition of it as:

Public theology critically and constructively attempts to engage with current socio-political issues in the public domain from a theological point of view. On a meta-theoretical level it critically reflects upon the public role of churches in a democratic society. It explores potential contributions of churches to the enhancement of democracy and common life and considers methods, conditions and limitations of such involvement in a democratic, secular and at the same time multi-religious, multicultural context. It presupposes that this engagement with the secular forms an essential part of Christian faith and theology. (p. 5)

In a brief analysis of Kusmierz above, one can conclude that public theology is critical, constructive, current, public, contextual, reflective, innovative, assertive, ecclesiastical, proactive and remedial in complex situations where society is located. That, in summary, is its role; it is proactive and reactive in a positive way contributing towards the workable solutions to the web of complexities in a society. This is in agreement with Chung (2017:153) that as a Christian theology, it can also be understood as a public ethical theology because of its involvement and continuing evolution in pressing world dilemmas. It is therefore prophetic, as it has always been propounded by Koopman. As a prophetic and reflective theology, it is understood as (Storrar 2007):

[A] collaborative exercise in theological reflection on public issues which is prompted by disruptive social experiences that call for our thoughtful and faithful response. (p. 6)

In another place, Storrar (2008:4–5) reinforces the fact that the task of public theology is to call Christians out of the world of mutual incomprehension into the world of public citizenship in the company of strangers. Kusmierz (2016) takes it further to define it as a theology that:

Focusses on a discussion methods, conditions, and limitations of religious participation in public discourse within a democratic, secular, and at the same time multi-religious, multicultural context. (p. 16)

Public theology does not emerge out of *tabula rasa*. It emerges out of a community. It cannot be confined by any marginal lines such as methodology or technical delimitations. It is true that (Kusmierz & Cochrane 2013):

Our religion does not end in church buildings. It propels us into public space to function as agents of transformation. Theology must therefore actively participate in debates concerning public welfare, values and norms, but also in the debates around foundational public policy and current affairs. (p. 80)

Thiemann (1991) is correct that:

Public theology is faith seeking to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives. (p. 21)

The idea is further elaborated by Van Aarde (2008:1216) that the social location of public theology is not the university

campus, but rather the public square. It is embedded in modern-day postsecular, populist culture for the public good. It is about conceiving new methodologies, tasks, ways, modes, styles and different places in the public sphere (Buttelli 2012:101). In some cases, it means taking some bold steps of swimming in uncharted waters. A good example is tackling issues such as homosexuality. This subject is for many theologians like uncharted waters, and that undertaking research related to it is a big risk. Biri and Manyonganise (2015) agree that:

The criminalisation of homosexuality in African societies means that researchers who seek to understand the phenomenon are confronted with secrecy and silence as those that have this orientation fear the homophobic violence that may result if they publicly identify themselves as such. (p. 225)

Public theology operates in a public square. It is a theological endeavour to determine the relationship between theology, the church and the public spheres as well as defining the public responsibility of the churches. 'It seeks actively to offer a theological perspective in public discourse on matters of common interest ...' (Kusmierz & Cochrane 2013:78).

The public square can sometimes be a dangerous space for a public theologian. It does not mean that a public theologian should become an investigative journalist, a tabloid or an intelligence spy. Public theologian is out to see how to re-set and re-assert theology in context. As a discipline, it does not find faults only, but it comes up with some remedial actions.

The critical reflections of public theology put it in a position to be critical to social decay and come up with a proposal for some remedial acts that are theologically correct. Public theology formulates positive affirmations as well as spells out rejections of misdemeanours in the society. In a pluralistic society like South Africa, its voice echoes in all spheres of society, with the aim of bringing order to the entangled social structures. This self-critical approach must be applied in pluralistic South Africa, so that public theology can make sense and make contributions to the theological dialogue. The underlying question is: 'What is theology supposed to do in order to achieve and to facilitate the transformation of culture?' Public theology strives to understand what is going on and what God is doing. Only after this critical analysis would they see how to respond.

As a critical theology in South Africa, public theology has always insisted on recognising how society has been racialised and how racialisation impacts theological reflections. Public theology as critical theological reflections on social issues has always engaged public theological discourses. It calls for remedial actions to address damages done to the dignity and sustainability of society. Because it is prophetic in nature, *it corrects, rebukes, and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tm 4:2).*

Uniqueness of public theology

Gleaning from the definition and the role above, one can rightly conclude that public theology's uniqueness emanates

from the fact that it is community based and has a scope on the human future. As Van Aarde (2008:1216) argues, public theology is observed in multifarious facets such as movies, songs, poems, novels, art, architecture, protest marches, clothing, newspaper and magazine articles. It strives for understanding that it should lead to harmony, hope and human expectation of a better future. Its *locus* in the public arena makes it a non-descriptive relational science that reanimates the soul. It is also unique by operating in ecumenical cooperation. Public theology is not an individualist discipline. Public theology in South Africa and elsewhere is, when African biblical scholarship becomes thorough in analysing the details of African contexts, using a whole array of historical and sociological tools (West 2010:30).

During the apartheid, theologians spoke prophetically as a corporate body through the vehicles such as South African Council of Churches (SACC), Christian Institute (CI), Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) and Evangelical Fellowship of South Africa (EFSA) now known as The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA). In the last decade or so, these voices continued to speak through South African Leadership Initiative (SACLI). The uniqueness of this formation is that it embodied most, if not all, Christian traditions – liberals, evangelicals, African Indigenous Churches, including the non-aligned movements like Messianic groups. The formation came into being when Christian leaders and theologians became concerned about corruption in President Jacob Zuma's government. They wrote a letter to the African National Congress in 2012. This letter received some gravel reactions from the General Secretary of ANC, Mr Gwede Mantashe, and he labelled it 'mischievous' and 'vitriolic'.²

Prophetic role of public theology

This was popularised by Koopman (2009:120) with a strong accent that public theology as a prophetic theology 'strives to reflect upon, articulate, describe, guide, accompany and be informed by the prophetic calling of churches in public life'. In the spirit of Kairos Theologians (1985), prophetic theology must be based on social analysis. Consequent to social analysis, there is an inevitable return to the Bible to find out how social relations should be constructed. In the sea of hopelessness that the pluralistic society is caught in, prophetic theology brings a message of hope. South African cultures are clashing all the time. The traditional versus the modern constantly breeds conflict. That is when the prophetic theology comes into play. Buttelli (2012:95) points this out that 'Prophetic theology must be a theology that begins in action, and not as mere theory, and ends in a new kind of action'. South Africa is politically liberated, but still spiritually bound. Pluralistic ideologies of abuse of human rights, termination of pregnancy, same-sex marriages and so on call for public theology's response, not to affirm or to negate, but to seek theology's role in the lives of the victims. Regardless of all these, public theology as a prophetic theology would be aligned 'with the contextual theological tradition in

2. <https://gatewaynews.co.za/mantashe-warns-clerics-to-back-off/> (11 April 2019).

South Africa' (Buttelli 2012:105), in other words, to seek and listen to the theological voice in the context.

Prophetic assertion comes through preaching. The prophetic voice echoes in decadency of the society. It comes through kerygma and incarnation (De Wet & Kruger 2013):

Preaching that ministers the Word of the eternal God to a society in need of change and destined for change can be defined as prophetic preaching. The prophetic voice of the church must be heard and this voice must challenge all the people in society to become deeply involved in addressing this problem (Pieterse 2001:122). Prophetic preaching does not shrink from disclosing and challenging the corrupt elements that keep the current state of this world from bearing witness to its destiny. (p. 1)

The prophetic mode referred to here is that of the form of witnessing and speaking without fear or favour (Smit & Hansen 2015:153). The time is now for public theology to engage with the pluralistic society, where hopelessness and uncertainty reign supreme and many voices are screaming and fighting for a public square.

Public initiatives by public theology

As a prophetic theology that is located in the societal context, public theology makes proposals or initiatives of practical steps to be taken to remedy the maladies identified in the nation. Initiatives are determined by the shape and size of the social ills dealt with. As a non-institutional religion, public theology endeavours to provide resources for people to connect between their faith and the disturbing issues facing their society. Public theology cannot be caged or canned. Secularism and pluralism are the inevitable reality of South African safety net covering ideals of democracy. So, God is not acknowledged in this kind of situation. Theology and the church are nullified, if not neutered. The fact is that South Africa is at the stage where the public spaces have supposedly been emptied of God. The reference to ultimate or transcendent reality is far-fetched. The church's mission of healing the world is hampered by political chasms created by unethical and unjust legislations. When justice is thrown out of civic affairs, 'topics such as philanthropy, humanitarian solidarity, fighting for justice, reconciliation, heroism, and a fixation with trying to capture ethical life in codes all come under review' (Lincoln 2011:70).

The politics without spirituality enhances godless secularism. Public theology is vocal in corrupt politics. It cannot keep silent while humanity, carrying *imago Dei*, is abused in the hands of corrupt politicians. I seem to agree fully with Allan Boesak (2005) that:

We really cannot allow the 'power of the people', for which we fought such long and hard battles, to be usurped by the power of elitist cliques, national or global, political or economic. We cannot allow politicians, even our elected representatives, to assume our political responsibility. That would inevitably lead to political estrangement, to our capitulation before government, which in turn leads to apathy which in turn leads to tyranny. Political passivity is the doorway to misuse of power. (p. 100)

Public initiatives by public theology can take the form of drafting memoranda of demands for justice, peaceful marches, engagement with politicians, disobeying the unjust laws and proactive prayers for divine interventions in the midst of social injustice. Wallis (2006) encourages theologians to:

Look for opportunities to broaden the public discourse. Write letters to the editor of the local newspapers. Offer opinion pieces. Call in to radio talk shows. Get involved in key local, national, and global issues. (p. 12)

This was a political and ecclesiastical hot potato in the 1980s when Boesak and other ecclesiastical leaders called for prayers for the downfall of apartheid regime. Most of the criticism of this call was from Afrikaans Christianity encased within the Dutch Reformed tradition. The same criticism was levelled against Willie Jonker, when in 1990 he stood up at the so-called Rustenburg Conference, and confessed for the evil of apartheid, especially in the Dutch Reformed Church. Naudé (2015) gives this picture of criticism and, to some extent, rejection:

This public witness (confession) elicited huge media exposure and received both widespread criticism and support from Christians. Jonker himself was vilified by many white (and suspicious black) Christians. It was specifically painful that the church council of Biesiesvlei, the town of his birth, rejected this confession of guilt in a letter to him, calling on him not to be manipulated by politics but to remain true to the Word of God. (p. 302)

A public theologian is not reticent to fight for justice by all means possible, where justice is denied. However, note is to be made that theological interventions need not be denunciatory or logically careless. They need not bring public conversation to a rude and grinding halt (Biggar 2011:68).

Public theology to enter the journey of transition from stoical passiveness

Public theology is the mouthpiece of Christ and the agent of peace in the world full of destabilisations, uncertainties and inhumane practices. It is not an armchair discipline. Public theology is an involved theology, not speaking from the distance, but within the context. Some of the famous missiologists in South Africa correctly admonish us that (Kritzinger, Meiring & Saayman 1994):

We do not proclaim from the distance, from the security of some haven of self-righteousness, but that we come very close to the people we are inviting, in relate to them in solidarity because we are as much in need of the good news as they are. (p. 143)

Transformation should be the result of discourses between politics and theology. Theology must be a partner in resolving the issues affecting society at large.

The church is a *communio* with God which cannot be celebrated without attention to the nature and the challenges of the community. Public theology enhances God's

communion with his people. It calls for togetherness to understand each other. Public theology and community are the *di ya thoteng di bapile* (comrades in arms) a Setswana idiom for comrades in arms. They operate and function in some form of symbiotic relationship. Public theology cannot operate without the community and the community becomes dysfunctional without public theology. Public theology is not there to serve itself or to influence others for egoistic concerns. It is there to serve the disjointed pluralistic society that is still battling to attain cohesion since 1994. South Africa is still divided along the race, tribe, work place, sexual orientation, even in sports and arts. Public theology as reflective and prophetic theology is there to give form or shape, to develop new communities with sanity and harmony. This was the vision of the famous public theologian, Beyers Naudé. He lived his faith with consistency, courage and hope. He devoted himself to the cause of human dignity and justice in South Africa, even during the critical times. He was indeed a prophet outside the walls of the church (Ackermann 2005).

The voices of the voiceless: Target of public theology

Public theology cannot operate without public activism as demonstration of the love of Christ incarnate. South Africa as a pluralistic society is full of cries that are in many ways unheard by the ordinary populace. There are victims of apartheid that will be with us for decades to come. These include the people of all racial groups in all population settlements. They are found in the city centres, townships, villages, farm areas and informal settlements. The poor 'whites' is an emerging phenomenon found in the city centres. These are the economically disadvantaged masses, and we see some of them on our street intersections and we label them 'beggars'. To use Speckman's (2007:144) description of them, they are either being destitute (*ptochos*) or beggars in a social sense (*prosaiteis*). They are visible but voiceless. Ethically, we are obligated to treat them as fully human, 'whether we hear them or not, they have a voice and through their presence, they are making statements, directed to us' (Gaie & Tabalaka in Chimhanda, Molobi & Mothoagae 2015:381). These circumstances call for the fact that theology and politics should be engaged in public conversations. Public theology is hearing the voices of the voiceless where laws of nature make these laws inaudible.

There are historically marginalised poor, physically disabled, the unemployed, people with a particular sex orientation, those with seared consciences because they committed abortion and those behind prison bars because of gross criminal acts they have performed. These voiceless masses are developing into some form of sub-cultures. Their unfortunate circumstances offer open opportunity for public theology's task of contextualising meaning of biblical narrative to become more pertinent to these sub-cultures (Chung 2017:61). This calls for honourable task of sensitising both the victims and the perpetrators of social maladies with some sense of responsibility and moral reasoning (Schweiker 2004):

Public theology requires a range of metaphors about freedom, responsibility, and rectification and moral reasoning in the globalised world, and therefore insists upon the ethical contribution of diverse traditions to the reconciled world. (p. 214)

After a quarter of a century of democracy in South Africa, the legacy of apartheid still lingers. Mathole (in Conradie & Pillay 2015) paints the picture:

Apartheid social engineering is still evident, especially in the patterns of human settlement, which occur largely according to race and economic status. Poverty, violence, illiteracy, poor sanitation, dysfunctional institutions and unemployment are rampant in old apartheid townships, squatter camps and the former Bantustans. People living in these areas are mostly vulnerable to harsh living conditions created by accidental fires and extreme weather conditions such as incessant rains followed by flooding. They have little or no security and they tend to be just one accident away from more hardships. (p. 126)

As citizens of the state, these social problems affect us. I concur with Beyers Naudé (in Hansen & Vosloo 2006:81) that the church as an institution will be deeply involved in and affected by these events. I know many of us are so used to them that we do not see or feel them anymore. Consciences need to be awakened to the reality of the voiceless masses. It is quite appropriate for us to reflect on the proper nature of Christian contributions to deliberation about issues in secular public forums (Biggar 2011:48). Christians must always be a disturbing presence in the society because of their protest against all forms of injustice (Vosloo 2017:163).

Conclusion

This article has shown that public theology is not a new phenomenon, but has been there though not termed that way. It is when theology immerses itself into the community with the aim of correcting the social maladies past and present. It is unique because it is not caged within the institutions such as the church, university or any form of academia. It is found in all spheres of life and is not limited by any dogmatic dictates. South Africa, as a pluralistic society, dominated by the majority Christians seems to be marginalising God or theology in all deliberations of the government. In a secular state, public theology is given an opportunity to attune itself to the voices of the voiceless. These voiceless masses are found in all settlement patterns of South Africa. Public theology has to be prophetic wherever possible to get societal harmony back in line. Parochialism and defeatism are not the ideal options for the public theology. As an epistemological discipline, an appeal is made for public theology to become significantly and visibly public in civil matters despite the pluralistic penchants and predilections.

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The author declares that this article is the original research and it has not been submitted anywhere else for publication.

Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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