

A perspective on notions of spirituality, democracy, social cohesion and public theology

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Dates:

Received: 19 Feb. 2014

Accepted: 21 May 2014

Published: 03 Sept. 2014

How to cite this article:

 Tshaka, R.S., 2014, 'A perspective on notions of spirituality, democracy, social cohesion and public theology', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35(3), Art. #1336, 6 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i3.1336>
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This article explores the notions of spirituality, democracy, social cohesion and public theology briefly. Whilst these notions seem unrelated to each other, the article finds that they are indeed very much related especially in a conversation pertaining to the role of theology in democratic South Africa today. It argues that these notions are particularly important if one seeks the unity of a dislocated people. The word dislocation here refers to more than merely those who were dispossessed of their wealth and land, but speaks especially also to a spiritual dislocation which happened as a result of that material dislocation. Black liberation theology which has always been public must be seen to incorporate issues of the spiritual in its reflections. All this, it is argued, has pertinent repercussions for social cohesion in South Africa today.

Introduction

In this article, the notions of spirituality, democracy, social cohesion and public theology are explored, albeit briefly. The article strives to argue that all these notions are intrinsically linked, although it might not seem inevitable at first. The notion of spirituality, it is argued, is of particular importance, simply because this notion appears to have been pushed into the background of theological discourse particularly during the era of the church's struggle against apartheid. It argues that spirituality remains particularly important today as many people – especially those still on the underside of history – continue to strive to make sense of their relationship with their Creator.

It is also argued that speaking properly of spirituality reveals that there is no separation of the spiritual from the material, but that there is in fact unity between the spiritual and the material. Therefore the misconception of spirituality as that which concerns itself only with the spiritual and the world, and that which will come into force once this material world has vanished, is chastised as false perception of the notion especially when viewed from within African Christian circles. The article questions a theology that has engendered this false perception of the notion. It then follows to explore the notion of democracy and exposing it as a notion not without its own flaws. Several questions relating to the notion of social cohesion are asked especially given the existing huge gap between those who have and those who exist on the margins of society.

Lastly it engages the notion of public theology and, whilst it does not discourage talk on public theology, it does remain suspicious of attempts that are aimed at replacing black liberation theology with the notion of public theology, which appears to be neutral for those who falsely associate black liberation theology with militancy and disorder.

A perspective on spirituality

Let us engage this task by exploring the notion of spirituality. We start with this notion first for no particular reason other than the fact that it is listed first in the title of this article. The notion in question, in my view, has not received the needed attention at least within the ambit of academic theology¹ in South Africa. This is particularly also the case within black theological circles. There are of course several reasons why spirituality was pushed, perhaps unintentionally, into the background of academic theological discourse in South Africa. One reason that one could think of seems to be the assumption inherent in the notion that spirituality lacks passion and militancy in a context where the imbibed position of black docility had become entrenched.

1. By academic theology here I refer especially to those institutions of higher learning where theology was taught as an academic discipline. This takes into account the fact that black liberation theology during the apartheid years was strongly discouraged and never considered a subject worthy of study at these predominantly white institutions. It is for this very reason that refers to black liberation theology as a guerrilla enterprise – by this I argue that since it was never welcomed in academic circles, it had to find ways of penetrating other black circles through means of ministers' caucuses and workshops.

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The frustration caused by mainline church traditions in South Africa not doing enough to fight apartheid and yet continuing to encourage a spirituality that seems detached from the socioeconomic, cultural and political situations, has been a subject for conversation amongst many black theologians in South Africa for years now. Kumalo refers to a conversation between Itumeleng Mosala and his mentor, Gabriel Setiloane, which prompted the latter to suggest that he was bewitched by the Christian faith and could therefore not simply shed it like a *snake would shed its skin* (Kumalo 2006:1f.; author's own emphasis).

For those who were engaged in an alternative theological hermeneutic, the black church could only come to its black self realisation once it departed from a theology that seemed to justify the subservient position and role of blacks especially during the apartheid epoch (Mosala 1989).

That is one way of looking at spirituality as a phenomenon. In fact spirituality proper cannot be understood unless one recognises its inherent ambivalence. There is of course another dimension to this phenomenon, and that relates to its elasticity and significance particularly for those on the margins of society. It was none other than James Cone who helped me to understand the endurance of the black soul in a context of harsh oppression. In his book, *The spirituals and the blues*, Cone reminds us of how black slaves could somewhat understand their positions of oppression by identifying particularly with the oppressed people in the Bible (Cone 1992:53ff.).

About this ambivalence of spirituality, Cone (1992:54) writes, 'to create the future in the "extreme situation" of American slavery was very difficult for black slaves. It meant accepting the burden and the risk of the not yet.' Cone (1992) continues:

actually when they encountered the divine presence and promise, as revealed in the event of Jesus' (death and resurrection, they knew that there was only one possibility for authentic human existence. And that was to live in freedom for the future. (p. 21)

Logic therefore becomes immaterial in such a situation. In the South African situation, we realise that a theology that seems to have penetrated black communities is the very theology that intentionally does not link structural injustices, for instance, with the spirituality of its adherents. This perception was underscored once again when I was recently invited to address a conference of the Christian Youth Movement (CYM) of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) in the Brits circuit.²

In that address I argued for the importance of having a teaching ministry for our church. That ministry, in my opinion, would entail providing opportunities for our congregants to be educated as we minister to them. To begin to see the relationship between the material and the spiritual

2.The Christian Youth Movement is the youth wing of the URCSA. Like many Christian youth movements in the country, it remains an essential organization, especially in a context of a great divide between the opulent and the extremely poor. Its mission is informed by Christian principles which are enshrined in its constitution. What seems to be valued most is the song and preaching which characterises their meetings, yet these invariably are removed from the structural problems created by apartheid and seem to temporarily escape from the real material issues of the day.

and to eventually come to the realisation that poverty is in fact not God ordained and that it is not by God's design that most that are poor happen to be black. More significantly, I argued, context and historicity play vital roles as we strive towards that teaching ministry.

I referred to the Easter celebrations which had become one of the key Christian events in our church calendar and reminded my audience of the disgusting objective of crucifixion which was essentially aimed at silencing those who dared to challenge delinquent hegemonies in their societies.³ I was very surprised, even disturbed, to realise that the perspective that I gave challenged the so-called spiritual perspective of the crucifixion which for them had nothing at all to do with politics. This as we will observe later is nothing strange and uniquely South African.

The American condition of slavery is another context in which we see the ambivalence of spirituality – its elasticity and its irrationality to the logical being (Cone 1992:23f.). To return to the South African context, one sees a similar functioning of spirituality as pointed out earlier. Our conception of spirituality is clearly informed by the lived experiences of the very people who embrace a particular form of spirituality.

In other words, there are clearly diverse factors that then suggest that contrary to what academic theology purports, there are in fact various spiritualities even within the different racialised groupings. When some people for instance speak of a Reformed spirituality, invariably they conjure up a form of life as was observed in the Geneva of Calvin (Tshaka 2009:294). This spirituality in my view has no consideration for those who were later converted to this faith. This was also because of attempts to make faith sophisticated as per the Reformed understanding of faith. Faith as an activity especially of the mind features nowhere more prominently than within the Protestant tradition. It was Wells and Quash (2010) who had this to say of the Christian faith:

the white man's largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his African soul; he was being redeemed from sins he did not believe he had committed; he was given answers to questions he had not asked. (p. 195)

In the South African context, the ambivalence of spirituality remains similar to the context of slaves in the United States of America (USA). Here, like in the USA past and present, one sees the duality which is exemplified in exploitative labour during the week and church on Sunday. Just like the spirituals of which Cone speaks, so do hymns play significant roles in expressing the need to live in freedom for the future (Cone 1992:22).

In an age of secularisation, to speak about spirituality and to link that to the public domain can be seen as being highly

3.The celebration of the Easter weekend is one of the key celebrations on the Christian calendar, especially in black South Africa. This is evidenced by the great rush to the *Moria* Mountain in Limpopo which is the headquarters for the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). The same is true within the mainline churches. My church, the URCSA, also values this weekend particularly and vigils are observed throughout the weekend. With no theological training, ordinary people relate the happenings of Easter to their own concrete situations in a spiritual manner.

controversial, in fact even discouraging. This is so for the following reason: according to Charles Taylor (2007) in his book, *A secular age*, he writes:

[A] certain awe still surrounds reason as a critical power, capable of liberating us from illusions and blind forces of instinct, as well as the phantasies bred of our fear and narrowness and pusillanimity. The nearest thing to fullness lies in this power of reason and it is entirely ours, developed if it is through our own, often heroic action. (p. 9)

In listening to the input of Itumeleng Mosala, who was invited to the conversation on spirituality, social cohesion and public theology at the University of Pretoria,⁴ I personally had hoped that he would speak and elaborate a little bit more to the audience about the matter of methodology on the matter, because it is a fact that for black liberation theology to be where it is today in South Africa – that is alive and kicking, and not irrelevant and dead as some people would want to believe – this theological hermeneutic had to engage in an intensive exercise of methodological restlessness. One only has to read the first two chapters of Mosala's magnum opus to see this fact (Mosala 1989). This was because black liberation theology had to defend itself to the dominant theological hegemony, that it was in fact genuine theological reflection, especially when it insisted on the lived experiences of those on the margins as crucial to its reflections. Methodology was considered significant, yet it needed to take the lived experiences of black people very seriously. These lived experiences, we contend, are not fantasies bred by the fear and narrowness of black people.

I believe that we shall have to insist on putting epistemologies and methodologies that were traditionally perceived as moribund on the table as we embark on this project. The work of Vuyani Vellem on *Imvuselelo* is of particular importance if we are to tap into the spiritualities in which black people are raised (Vellem 2009). Again these *Imvuselelo* [revivals] speak to an ambivalent spirituality; one that defies human logic and reason. If the Trinity which is Western in all its conceptions is something that some of us agree is beyond human comprehension, it then is only right that we must admit that the spiritual realm is much bigger than our human logic permits. And so we must park this point and ask questions such as: Whose spirituality are we talking about? Who dictates the spirituality which must engender social cohesion? And whether those of us in the public domain recognise the many lived experiences which influence our spiritualities?

This then reminds me of a significant point made by Antonio Gramsci according to Forgacs (cited in Forgacs 2000). He argues essentially that from time to time when some from the masses progress, they then seem to lose bits of their organic being (Forgacs 2000:305). This is very important

4. Itumeleng Mosala was one of the key conversational partners invited to ponder on the questions of spirituality, democracy, Public Theology and social cohesion. His reflections were paramount especially in light of his own theological scholarship. This article flows from that conversation held at the University of Pretoria under the auspices of the Director for the Centre for Public Theology at the University of Pretoria, Dr Vuyani Vellem.

especially for those in the middle class. I am of the view that because of this progress, the majority have developed a love-hate relationship with the black middle class. They love them because they represent hope, the exit from squalor and poverty, yet at the same time they hate them because this class claims to speak on the behalf of the majority who still remain on the underside of history and therefore have no idea of the continued challenges faced by the majority.

A perspective on democracy

Having said all the above, I now come to the notion of democracy. My current research interests include, amongst others, a research project of looking at Malcolm X's 1964 speech titled 'The Ballot or the Bullet' (Tshaka 2012:882–898). In this project I try to compare this watershed speech with the current South African context. Looking at how the ballot, which for us transpired in 1994, is currently being threatened by the bullets of service delivery and the still huge economic discrepancy between whites and blacks in this country. So what was significant for Malcolm is also significant for us in South Africa: a functional democracy. Stellenbosch economist Sampie Terreblanche argues that the notion of democracy is not as sacrosanct as we would like to believe (Tshaka & Makofane 2010:532–546).

A scholar who helped me to understand this ambivalence of democracy even better is Naom Chomsky. In one of his numerous books titled, *Media control: The spectacular achievements of propaganda*, he speaks of a spectator democracy (Chomsky 2011:22). Chomsky recalls Walter Lippmann who argued that the media's manufacturing of consent is necessary because the common interest eludes public opinion entirely and can only be understood and managed by a specialised class of responsible men who are smart enough to figure things out.

Having established that class, Lippmann (cited in Chomsky 2011) then argues that this class has to pit itself against the majority, which he calls 'the bewildered herd'. In other words, for him the smart people have to protect themselves from the trampling and roar of the bewildered herd (Chomsky 2011:22). Seen in this way, what has therefore happened in Marikana⁵ was nothing but the actions of a bewildered herd. This picture is not only observed in Marikana, but in all the townships where we are seeing the spiralling service-delivery protests in this country. So, contrary to Mosala likening the protesters at Marikana to a child who never thinks that a parent will exert maximum force, this specialised class, because they are protecting their interests, exert maximum force against the bewildered herd.⁶

There are therefore two functions in a democracy, according to Chomsky. The specialised class, the responsible men,

5. Marikana is a place located in the North West province of South Africa and home to the platinum mines owned by London Mines (Lonmin). It shot to fame when police opened fire, killing more than 30 miners who were striking for better wages. The killing of civilians seems to have become a familiar phenomenon in recent South African past. In the same year, 2012, Andries Tatane was shot dead by police as he participated in a service-delivery protest in the Free State.

6. This reasoning became apparent as Mosala tried to explain the Marikana situation. This is not surprising to me as this one-time very reputable black scholar has joined the Tenderpreneurship which seems to have taken South Africa by storm.

carry out the executive function, which means they do the thinking and planning and understand the common interest. Then there is the bewildered herd, and they have a function in democracy as well (Chomsky 2011:23). Their function in democracy is to be spectators. However, since it is a democracy, occasionally they are allowed to lend their weight to one or other member of the specialised class – and this happens during voting time when you will see politicians again speaking the language of the people on the ground and that are seen actually entering the shanty towns to assure the masses that they have their interest at heart. This attitude was not made clearer than at the African National Congress (ANC)'s 100-year birthday celebration when the deputy president of the ANC, Kgalema Motlanthe made a toast and said they were drinking sparkling wine on behalf of the masses (Du Plessis 2013).

The picture painted so far raises significant questions for social cohesion. In a country fraught with contradictions, it is perhaps significant to ask a few critical questions relating to the subject of social cohesion. We must, I believe, ask: Social cohesion for what? Why is it necessary? For what purpose must this be encouraged? To what does such a call for social cohesion want to respond? Responding faithfully to these questions suggests that we see a common problem and we agree on the causes of the problem. Social cohesion in my opinion, in the context of present-day South Africa, is a means towards a particular end.

Tavis Smiley and Cornel West prefer to speak of a covenant with black America (cited in Smiley 2006). They realise that there are particular problems that seem to be specifically ganging up more so on black communities than they do on white communities in present-day America. We in South Africa have been branded by the world as the miracle child and this branding forces us to act accordingly by all means necessary. We have at best become the most insincere nation in terms of what our true feelings really are. We have compressed our feelings and seem astounded when pockets of racial eruptions occur in this country. Most of our problems are as a direct result of a legal racialised past that we share. This is not unique to us, but refers to darker people across the globe.

Critical theology in this country has always insisted on recognising how we have been racialised and how that process of racialisation impacts on our theological reflections. In other words, therefore, critical theological reflections on issues such as the black theology of liberation and others have always been public theological discourses. This brings us to the notion of public theology which seems to have been lifted up as the newest, most relevant theological reflection today in South Africa and elsewhere. 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).

For us to understand the conversation on public theology in South Africa, we need to have an understanding of the centre for theological inquiry in Princeton. Storrar's (2007) article titled 'A Kairos moment for public theology',⁷ is noteworthy and has received interesting feedback from the likes of Maluleke. For Storrar doing public theology suggests participation in the public sphere. He employs Habermas's understanding of the public sphere, which is the domain where citizens gather to consider issues of general interest (Storrar 2011:23–43). He names what he believes to be the four tasks for public theology; creating an inclusive public sphere; welcoming the stranger; expressing anger and resisting privatisation (Storrar 2011:23–43). Whilst all these issues which for him constitute public theology sound acceptable and undoubtedly noble, Storrar appears to be a bit naive in as far as he does not engage the question of power which lies at the heart of those who make available such space for genuine public theology to thrive.

In a way, according to Storrar, liberation theologies are not necessarily public theologies but rather expressions of public anger (Storrar 2011:36). They are necessary therefore only insofar as they struggle for inclusion in the public sphere. Storrar's understanding of public theology is highly problematic if it assumes that the questions that frame the public are predetermined (Storrar 2011:23–46). In fact it is my view that there can never be one public theology, but in fact several public theological discourses. The fact that I do not reserve some time to deal with the question of power and who dictates the terms for discourse blinds us from seeing the questions that frames the public spheres of those on the underside of history.

In fact if we follow Storrar (2011:23–46) blindly in this direction, we will fall into the same trap that black theology of liberation fell into when it began to obsess about a methodology in an attempt to become more acceptable to mainline theology. The choice for neutral language to explain the real structural problems of South Africa has resulted in an obfuscation which is manifested in the many societal challenges we are facing in present-day South Africa. Since in the minds of many a black theology of liberation wrongly conjures up a militant figure, this theological reflection is to be rejected and to be replaced with a more civilized reflection such as public theology, for instance. The question of interlocution which remains central to practitioners of black theology of liberation is ignored all together.

An African Christology remains relevant today simply because it is not by chance that the majority of the world's

7. The Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT) is an initiative borne from the vision of the Director of the Centre for Theological Inquiry (CTI) at Princeton, Dr William Storrar. Dr Nico Koopman, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch was its first president from the inception of the network in 2007 till 2008. On its official website, the network explains part of her mission as follows: 'The GNPT seeks, through interaction and collaboration, to be a genuinely global network, where the global and the local come together. Despite our differences, the Christian faith challenges us to engage theologically with public life in all its aspects, political, economic, legal and social. We are concerned with the expression of public theology, how it is conceived in particular contexts, and how it is applied' (Haire 2008–2011).

people who happen to be poor and marginal are Africans and black. The existential questions that concern these people are no doubt different from those who happen to be non-black and European. Because of this reality, it cannot be denied that African Christians' relation and imagination about God is different.

Again it seems to me to be an attempt at suggesting a theology that is safer for the fragile South African context. Black theology of liberation is not particularly considered relevant and seems to be made out as being too militant and angry. I have no issues with the notion of public theology until it wants to give a false impression that it brings something new to the public debate that black liberation theology has not done yet. From the history of black liberation theology in this country it is clear that what the practitioners of this hermeneutic were busy with was public all along. I am going to end on this note and hope that what I said gives us enough to engage with each other as we put hands and feet to this timely and very relevant project.

Spirituality and being intertwined with the material conditions of humans

The spiritual was always considered as being intertwined with the physical. This point was made poignantly clear by Steve Biko (1976) when he argued that:

We believed in one God, we had our own community of saints through whom we related to our God, and we did not find it compatible with our way of life to worship in isolation from the various aspects of our lives. Hence worship was not a specialized function that found expression once a week in a scheduled building, but rather it featured in our wars, in our beer drinking, our dances and our customs in general. Whenever Africans drank, they would first relate to God by giving a portion of their beer away as a token of thanks. When anything went wrong at home they would offer sacrifice to God to appease him and atone for their sins. There was no hell in our religion. We believed in the inherent goodness of man hence we took it for granted that all people at death joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect. (p. 42)

The problem, it would seem, comes up once we fall into the trap of separating the two, the spiritual from the material. My dismay with the CYM, when realising that any theological comment that challenges the hegemonies is considered political and departs from the spiritual task which is considered the core of Christian theology, reminded me of the challenge that is faced by academic theology even today. I have made mention of the perceptions of the spirituality that has become entrenched in the minds of many South African Christians (see for instance my reference to spirituality in this article as being perceived of as docile and lacking in militancy). More importantly has been the fact that a black theological hermeneutic which took the criticism of hegemonies as being central in Christian reflection has yet to transcend its position as a guerrilla enterprise (Tshaka 2010b:124–135). Whilst this hermeneutic might be known in academic theological circles, it seems especially ignored

within church circles and in some instances even considered dangerous.

Elsewhere I have argued (Tshaka 2010a:51) that theological reflection is most at home within the realm of the church. I made this assertion contrary to attempts at theological reflections that seem to ignore and even discourage the context of the church. That context is the ambivalence that is created by a spirituality that inverts the cross from a symbol of harsh oppression to victory over the powers that are. It is this approach in my view which has kept the likes of James Cone in the church despite the harsh criticisms that they have of dominant theological hegemonies. In fact it is this approach which in my view resulted in the likes of Gabriel Setiloane to declare that they are bewitched by this faith (cited by Kumalo 2006:1).

Something is clearly amiss in the South African context. It is therefore not by chance that notions such as ethics, morality, et cetera, seem to take centre stage in South African public life today. That these issues and many others are debated in public life also happens during a time where service-delivery protests seem to be at their highest. Police brutality seems to become an everyday occurrence, with Africans from other parts of the continent particularly being on the receiving end of this ill treatment, not only from the police but some South Africans as well. The brutality displayed in the killings of ordinary people by thugs as well as the raping of the elderly and infants which grace our newspapers on an almost daily basis suggest that something is seriously wrong with this one-time miracle child of the world. Indeed the current South African situation can at best be described as a nervous condition. The need to link the spiritual to the material seems to be urgent at this stage.

Towards a covenant with black South Africa!

Moral regeneration which must have at its heart the intention to foster accountability of communities to their various constituencies must be a covenant especially with black South Africa. I say this simply because the black experience is still a matter that cannot and must not be ignored by serious political as well as theological leadership in South Africa. If we agree that we have in this country a history that had encouraged black people to deny themselves and to imitate other cultures, then we must admit that there are things that black people will have to do for themselves and on their own terms in their communities. It means that in as much as we acknowledge the histories which had engendered differences amongst us a nation, as black people we need to begin to challenge our various leaderships to be more intentional in dealing with problems that seem to be uniquely ours. Some of these reflections were shared by myself at a congregation in the Eastern Cape organised by the public sector, training in collaboration with the Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA) (see especially the paper by Tshaka 2010c).

I refer again to a quote from the Willie Lynch (2009) letter. Lynch was the slave owner whose name became infamous for hanging black people, especially in the south of the USA in the 1700s. He was once invited to share his tactics with other slave owners about how to make a slave behave according to the expectations of his master. As he rode into Virginia he felt disturbed by the sight of black bodies hanging from the trees. He was disturbed simply because he thought these masters were messing precious cargo. This is what he (Lynch 2009) said as he shared his highly successful tactics on the banks of the Virginia River in 1712:

on top of my list is age, but only because it starts with an 'a'. The second is color or shade. There is intelligence, size, sex, sizes of plantation, status of plantation, attitude of owners, whether the slaves live in a valley or on a hill Have fair hair, course hair, or is tall or short. Now that you have a list of differences ... I shall assure you that distrust is stronger than trust and envy, stronger than adulation, respect or admiration. The black slaves after receiving this indoctrination shall carry on and will become self refuelling and self generating for hundreds of years maybe thousands. (p. 7ff.)

It seems very clear that this prediction applies very well to black people. I say this because black people and their communities remain divided because we are more concerned with looking at the issues that do not really seem to build us. We are led by envy and distrust for our fellow black people. A spirituality that has managed the oppressed to transcend adversity and to invert symbols of oppression into symbols of victory is the spirituality that is called for. More importantly this time, when making this call we need to realise the historicity which has brought us to where we are today. Our spirituality, we need to reckon, has never been one which makes us to distinguish between the spirit and the flesh. This has always been the point of the hermeneutics of black liberation theology.

Conclusion

The notions of spirituality, democracy, public theology and social cohesion are significant notions that call for diligent attention. Yet we are faced by the challenge of a divided country. Divided mainly along racial and class lines. Theology has a significant role to play. Yet honest theology is one which does not dismiss the past but uses it wisely to learn from it with the objective to avoid similar mistakes made in the past. We must admit that we are a racialised nation. To dismiss this is not helpful at all. To admit it and to inquire how to transcend this is what is of utmost importance. This article wants to contribute towards such a broader discourse.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge the continued support of my wife and partner, Mrs. Precia Galaletsang Tshaka. I also want to thank

my three wonderful children who I believe are starting to understand my academic calling.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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