


The essential role of the entire community of peer-reviewers in championing the quality of scholarly publications

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Since the last editorial in 2024, HTS Theological Studies (hereafter HTS) has been featuring successful special collections on diverse themes – addressing pressing societal and academic challenges. We were fortunate to be home to regular collections such as the African Platform for New Testament Scholars, Inter-religious Dialogue and Comparative Theological Studies. We acknowledge the editorial efforts of Prof Ernest van Eck, Prof Jaco Beyers and Dr Ishraq Ali. New collections such as Mission and Vulnerability, the continued relevance of Black Theology of Liberation and the Kairos Document as well as a Festschrift in memory of the work of Prof Welile Mazamisa produced a variety of academic and contextual insights. The section editors including Prof Lukwikilu Mangayi, Prof Lygunda Fohle, Prof Magomme Masoga, Prof Luvuyo Ntombana, Prof Mphumezi Hombana, and Prof Gift Tlharihani Baloyi are also appreciated. The breadth of research interests underscores the journal's multidisciplinary nature, complemented by submissions in the general collection from scholars across Africa and beyond. We anticipate upcoming special collections, particularly on the relevance of the Belhar Confession, and are currently accepting proposals for special collections until 30 September 2025, with scheduled publication in 2026.

In addition to the journal's unique African epistemological impact (as described earlier) it has also experienced an upward shift in its ranking, CiteScore and impact within the category of religious studies. This is mainly attributable to the scholars who appreciate the quality of our publications and find them an attractive platform for making their own research public. It is therefore essential to consider how we can sustain our impact and quality. That will be the topic of the present editorial and of a few future ones.

A key factor in maintaining quality of manuscripts is the role of reviewers. Securing reviewers remains challenging for a myriad reasons. One reason is that they do not receive any financial incentive from their affiliate institutions or directly from us as a journal. While some sporadic financial incentives exist, mostly for editors at some institutions, it is unlikely that it will expand to include also peer-reviewers of journal manuscripts. There are other factors such as time constraints, especially among academics promoted to serve in senior administrative positions, as well as situations where it happens that an academic receives a manuscript that is not, at the time, their exact focus and niche area. It also does not weight too much, in relation to other key performance areas in performance appraisals of academics at Higher Education institutions. It is as if this is a 'Cinderella' task among others when it comes to outstanding academic performance. But beyond this, academics might also be driven by personal interests and career goals, which, while perhaps justifiable to a certain extent, can cripple the collective academic project of ensuring the quality of academic publications in the domain of knowledge. There seems to be a growing trend towards individualism and unhealthy competition among academics within academia, which can undermine the communal interest of upholding the standard of academic research and output. In regions such as Africa, where the philosophy of ubuntu emphasises community, this growing shift towards a selfish, egoistic individualistic culture in 'academia' is particularly concerning.

The non-participation in peer-review processes by academics creates a vacuum in the ongoing entering of new submissions. However, we should acknowledge that the volume of manuscripts currently received and accepted by journals for review is indeed much more than an average academic would receive a few years ago. Nevertheless, if we want to maintain and increase the quality of research output, we need to discuss how this could be championed. Therefore, it might be important to ask how academics can re-imagine their role as peer-reviewers and to regard this as an essential role and an academic duty in enhancing and maintaining quality of publications.

In fact, it is only academics who are able to decide with editors on quality of manuscripts. Often, the quality of manuscripts is being laid in front of the door of journals, publishers and editors. Indeed, they are responsible – but this is far from the complete picture. It is peer-reviewers who would assess the clear crafting of argumentation, whether the article is situated within the scope and focus of the journal and whether indeed the article makes a unique contribution in the field of knowledge or whether this is mere repetition, worthless and useless.¹

One of the crucial dimensions here is the capacity of academics and reviewers to tap with ease into historical sources, disciplinary knowledge and trajectories – to establish the originality of the manuscript. This underscores the role of experienced academics – those who have spent many years within their field of knowledge. Therefore, experienced academics (veterans) and disciplinary specialists assist in assessing whether what they read constitutes new knowledge or mere redundancy and whether the article is deeply rooted and has sufficiently engaged with the most relevant – classic and contemporary – sources in presenting its argument. Therefore, declining a review without referring to another experienced academic may often leave the manuscript in the hands of those with less knowledge and deep rootedness in the knowledge field in which the manuscript is situated because there are only a small number of experienced academics of which many are almost about to retire. If these academics participate regularly as reviewers and share their knowledge, this will indeed lead to the increased academic rigour, less ‘salami-slicing’ and articles that will indeed produce and present original knowledge in the field. Although I have observed in my career also the opposite of this; namely that experienced academics is more overwhelmed by academic work than young academics, and they at times do not do justice to providing more constructive, detailed feedback to manuscripts. However, in the main, we should concede that experienced academics possess a wealth of knowledge, informed by past conferences, scholarship and expertise, needed to ensure that the quality of outputs is maintained. In a broader sense, we can imagine the role of experienced academics as mentors during a review process, guiding and advising less experienced reviewers who have just entered the field of academic publishing. Through their constructive feedback, an emerging author (not always it is the case of experienced vs. emerging) is mentored, refining their skills of academic writing, argumentation and critical thinking. When a manuscript is rejected, or recommended for resubmission, this assists the author to increase the rigour and argumentation of the manuscript, in the quest to craft a unique contribution. Reviewers should not be reluctant to do it – and act without fear or favour. In this way even new research trajectories are borne, which will not only complement the field of study but also help build a new generation of scholarship.

1. Some scholars believe that it is indeed possible to submit and publish a paper in a journal with not ‘really’ new knowledge (Sample 2025).

On the other hand, experienced academics are not and should not be gatekeepers. A good balance between experienced, novice and emerging academics in the peer-review process is necessary to ensure the integrity and sustainability of academic publishing. Such a collaboration between experienced academics and emerging researchers in the review process can ensure both quality and continuity in the life of a journal. But the ideal will be this: all of us as academics working together for the sake of a quality publication. What is required, therefore, is not a one-sided transfer of skills from experienced to emerging academics, but a dialogical process of mutual enrichment and challenge. It is often emerging and novice researchers who, through their engagement with the latest research and the challenges of the context, inspire experienced researchers to re-imagine, rethink and refine their models and theories. Conversely, it is often the questions of an experienced academic about the rootedness and historical trajectory of an article that helps an emerging researcher to refine their questions and methodologies. In this sense, peer review is a place of interaction and re-imagining. If a healthy mix of reviewers from different schools of thought, backgrounds and ideological strands review a submission together, it can refine the quality of argumentation in academic publications. Without such quality interaction, academia runs the risk of producing shallow and hollow research, even if it claims to be ‘unique’. All academics – experienced or emerging who are called upon to review submissions – bear joint responsibility for the texture and quality of published academic texts. Whereas novice academics usually see reviewing as an exciting role and engage in it eagerly, many experienced academics often decline or nonchalantly ignore an invitation to review.

I invite all academics to contribute to our collective scholarly project by actively participating in the review process of academic publishing, especially if it is in your field of expertise. The quality of a publication depends on *who* is involved in the review process. Once a manuscript is published, all of us are exposed to those publications. It is there for public consumption – or even their outrage.² When a book or article has been published, it is too late to argue that it lacks quality, when you were in the position to improve it before publication. When a review request lands in your inbox, please think twice before declining. And if you are really unable, please point the editors to a suitably qualified expert in the field who could assist in this invaluable process of peer review.

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2. See for instance the article that was retracted by the authors after a publication of an article and finding on ‘coloured’ people (News24 2019).