


Sounding the sacred in the age of fake news – Practical theology reflecting on the public sphere

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Dates:

Received: 17 May 2020

Accepted: 10 Aug. 2020

Published: 14 Oct. 2020

How to cite this article:

Kloppers, E., 2020, 'Sounding the sacred in the age of fake news – Practical theology reflecting on the public sphere', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(2), a6131. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.6131>

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The public sphere, in which religion is lived and in which religious singing functions, is briefly discussed and related to manipulated truths and 'fake news' regarding the use of spiritual songs and hymns as religious and cultural offerings, with reference especially to texts displaying a disregard for responsible hermeneutical principles. A plea is made not only for a practical theology that engages critically with the fundamentals of the current culture and the use of religious symbols in public, but also for a sounding theology that reflects on communication through singing and other forms of art in the public space of worship as well as in the more 'visible' public sphere whilst creating beauty in the process of reflection. Through this means, spaces of resonance could be opened where people become participants drawn in into a *performance of practical theology*, reflecting together on the religion they live and finding new ways of voicing their faith in the public sphere, unveiling aspects of authenticity and truth.

Contribution: From an interdisciplinary perspective fitting the scope of the journal, it is shown how hymns, texts and music draw people into a performance of a practical theology reflecting on lived religion, while finding new ways of performing the sacred in the public sphere – in the process thus opening up aspects of truth in a world of fake news.

Keywords: Public sphere; Performance; Singing; Hymns; Aesthetics; Worship; Fake news.

Introduction

Hymns are important for the ritual of the church service, but they are also an essential part of the cultural offerings representing Christian symbols in the public sphere. Forming part of religious and cultural identities, frames of (world) interpretation, ideologies, values and the collective cultural memory of nations, hymnody builds bridges between personal faith, the church and public Christianity whilst also opening paths into the 'public sphere' of a pluralist and secular or post-secular society. Discussing the functioning of hymns in a diversity of contexts, I showed that hymns and songs have been functioning in the public sphere for political, nationalist and ideological purposes, but that they also can play a positive role in bringing people together, transforming people and contributing to change in oppressive political and social systems (Kloppers 2020). In this article, I focus on the public sphere in which hymnody functions and discuss the possibilities for performing a sounding practical theology reflecting on the aesthetics of communication through singing and other forms of art in the public space of worship as well as in the more 'visible' public sphere whilst creating beauty in the process of reflection. Through this means, spaces of resonance are opened, where people become participants drawn into a *performance of practical theology*, reflecting together on the religion they live and finding new ways of voicing their faith creatively in the public sphere, unveiling aspects of authenticity and truth.

Fake news in the public square

The society we live in has become part of a culture of 'fake news' involving the manipulation of facts and thought on Facebook, television and Twitter, in parliaments and newspapers, as well as in film and other media. These media constitute the social public sphere, the virtual space where ideas are formed, ideologies entrenched and identities developed – where 'truth' is negotiated and layers of power and authority established. Spreading any kind of information has become easy, making it difficult to distinguish facts from fake news, as the spread of information regarding the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has shown so vividly. To know 'truth' may have seemed an easier task in times past, when it was in the hands of a few powerful people who were 'authorised' to construct truth and tell people what should be believed as the truth. Lehnert

Note: This article is published in the section Practical Theology of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa.

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(2019:74) describes how we live in the belief that we decide for ourselves, but that, in reality, search engines know what we dream of and what we strive for. Such algorithmic systems are becoming more adept at encapsulating us, so that we no longer have to communicate with those who think differently from us. He concludes that where information is managed in automated systems, it is easy to reject anything that disturbs our way of thinking as fake news and then 'circle around our own mirror images'.

The Dutch practical theologian Ruard Ganzevoort, together with Helga Knecht (2004), describes film as part of a reality that is 'aestheticised' – a form of cultural expression in contemporary society that provides possibilities for forming views of truth, meaning and identity, similar to the way in which symbols of the Christian faith (language, ritual, texts, music and architecture) are re-presented exemplarily in worship, enabling believers and non-believers to encounter the world of Christian symbols that influence cultures, whilst cultures also influence Christian symbols. Discussing *The Truman Show*, a film in which the life of a 'true man' is presented as 'the truth', Ganzevoort and Knecht (2004) argue that on many levels the film shows how truth is constructed through various media and that people often accept it without thinking. What people construct as the truth also becomes their gods that live among them and control them. At the end of the film, when everything has been exposed and *The Truman Show* cannot be continued, the presenter significantly declares: 'Nothing is fake; it is merely controlled'. The viewers of the show see the truth through the cracks, but they are not disturbed by the fact that they have been misled for so long – they just switch to another channel and a different show.

Pfeijffer (2020) analyses the changes YouTube has brought about in society in its 15 years of existence and comes to the conclusion that people are now famous not for their moral integrity (as the saints were in earlier times) or because of their knowledge or skills, but for their perceived authenticity. He maintains they are role models because they create the impression of being themselves and of being close to the people, with an endless stream of daily footage about themselves. Authenticity is valued, as that is exactly what is missing in our world. Pfeijffer argues that, as a consequence, a generation is growing up that does not care for morals, knowledge or skills – the purpose of their lives is rather to imitate people who create the illusion of authenticity. If illusions of authenticity are created, if nothing is fake but *merely* controlled and if one accepts that hymns are also cultural products that offer meaning, then a number of questions arise: Who controls things and who holds the power regarding what is sung in public and in worship? Who benefits financially? Who is allowed to speak and who is silenced? What truth is presented? Whose truth? Who or what are the gods constructed, and who are the gods controlling us – performers, publishers, pastors, priests or presidents who present the 'truth' by sounding the sacred?¹

1. In 2018, President Cyril Ramaphosa quoted *Thuma Mina* at the end of his State of the Nation address. In an address on COVID-19, he again mentioned the campaign that received its name from this song, saying: '... this is the most definitive *Thuma*

Ganzevoort and Knecht (2004:n.p.) refer to the 'imprisonment of the truth', emphasising that practical theologians should not only analyse, describe and expose – to be more than 'sociologists studying religion', they have to take a stand and actively reject the gods that manipulate people and the fake reality that is presented. They conclude: 'It is our task to fight for authenticity, for truth and indeed, for beauty' (Ganzevoort & Knecht 2004:n.p.).

The linking of truth to beauty is significant. A life of creativity, beauty and truth means a life that is more than the sentimental and often superficial cultural products with which people are bombarded in many contemporary religious songs and hymns – cultural products presented to people and churches that are characterised by clichéd musical forms, a lack of literary quality and especially theological questionability. Peter Bubmann, Professor of Practical Theology in Erlangen, criticises praise songs for the '*antiquierte und theologisch halbgebildete Schmalspurdogmatik*' – the use of disputable dogmatic views, metaphors from patriarchal times that are uncritically echoed, outdated biblical metaphors, especially metaphors of royalty and war in the predicates for God, a lack of consciousness regarding inclusive language and the power relations embedded in language (Bubmann 2017b:142–143). This kind of critique of hymns and contemporary worship songs is often seen as 'elitist', but it pertains to applying responsible principles of hermeneutics, admitting that we are searching for truth and acknowledging that certain views can be nearer to the truth than others. Pleading for the discipline of hymnology to change its name and be incorporated or extended into *cultural studies*, in order to include praise and worship songs, as well as singing in the public sphere, Fischer (2017:97–113) argues that a study of hymnody as part of cultural studies should proceed from methodological agnosticism, thus bracketing the question of truth in its scholarly work, similar to religious studies or sociology of religion. Observing, analysing critically, describing and giving normative viewpoints have been inherently part of the method of hymnology: to search for truth within a broader interpretative community, to actively take a stance against untruth and half-truths and to promote meaningful singing in worship, as well as the public sphere. As with all research, one should ask whose interests are served: whose interest would be served by bracketing the question of truth in studying hymnody? One-sided world views and religious views, along with dubious views of science, can be strengthened by singing, whether in the liturgy of mainstream churches, on the praise and worship stage or in the public sphere. The questionable way in which quotations from the Bible are used by groups and churches all over the world to promote exclusivity, racism and hate is one of the prime sources of fake news.

Mina moment for our country' (Ramaphosa 2020). The aim certainly would be to instil hope in people amidst a very uncertain situation. Instead of hope, another politician, the former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, pictured a situation of *hopelessness*, describing the Australian government's approach to the crisis as 'go late, go half-measures, and go to Hillsong' (Rudd 2020). Hillsong is a huge charismatic megachurch that originated in Sydney, Australia, in 1983 that is known for its popular praise and worship songs.

Aesthetics and ethics: Practical theology with relevance in the public sphere

The task of a practical theology that is active in the public sphere is to reflect critically on the meaning and influences of religion in public and more specifically on Christian orientations, rituals and symbols in various contexts. Practical theology functions on the level of a public theology wherever it critically engages with society or the 'public sphere'. Church history, systematic theology or biblical studies could also be engaged in public theology, wherever these disciplines engage critically with society and the 'public sphere', according to the theologians of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Research Centre for Public Theology in Bamberg (2020; see also Höhne 2015:35–40 for perspectives on the use of terminology in the field of public theology). Bubmann (2017a:146) differentiates between the three levels of (1) public religion, (2) public church and (3) public theology. He describes public theology as the theoretical reflection on the phenomena of public religion and public church, arguing that the reflection does not have to function on the academic level only. Public theology includes reflecting *with* people who are involved with Christian actions and symbols in various contexts, thus opening up possibilities for broad participation (Schlag 2017:17).

Engagement with the public sphere and working with society could happen in many contexts and take on a multitude of forms, such as working with the poor and helping migrants, whilst also reflecting theologically and critically on the methods, ways and layers of involvement. One example that is relevant for this article is the rituals associated with disasters – official ceremonies with presentations and interpretations (*Darstellung und Deutung*) that have religious dimensions. These events often mirror the liturgical forms of a worship culture, with rituals functioning on the level of a civil religion, opening up space for a diversity of people in a multireligious and pluralist society to collectively mourn the loss of loved ones and giving meaning in a difficult situation. These rituals can be seen as a form of 'Ritendiakonie' (Kranemann 2018), a *diaconia* offered by churches or chaplains, sometimes with the aid of scholars of ritual and liturgical studies. It is on this level of *being of service to others* by creating meaningful liturgical forms that aesthetics and ethics come together. The intersection of aesthetics and ethics contributes to 'the public significance of practical theology' (Höhne 2017; Schlag, Klie & Kunz 2007). The word *leitourgia*, indicating 'public service' or service to the community, means in effect that all liturgies are in service of people in public. It is not only 'crisis liturgies' that fall into this category, but I present these rituals as an example of the involvement of 'forms of the church' in processes of lived religion in the more 'explicit' public sphere, and also the role of scholars of ritual and liturgical studies reflecting on these processes. Music connected to the Christian faith and the singing of Christian hymns often play a prominent role in these events of mourning, offering space for resonance and bringing comfort and hope (Waßweiler 2019).

The value of ritual and beauty cannot, however, be measured by one-sided political, community or social 'needs'. It is illustrated by a narrative of Steffensky (2018:45–46), in which he recalls a weekend of the Christians for Socialism in Berlin in 1968, when somebody suggested they hold a service the next day. Steffensky relates how they discussed (a bit embarrassed) the meaning that a service would have for them, as a group, and for the goals they were pursuing. He describes how Helmut Gollwitzer, the respected old 'leftist' theologian, listened to the discussion for a while, and then said, 'I like worship, because it is beautiful'. Steffensky emphasises that Gollwitzer did not say 'because it strengthens us and brings us hope'. He did not want worship because of its specific usefulness, but said 'it is beautiful'. Steffensky (2018:46) admits that, at the time, they had little understanding of 'the *valuable uselessness* of our tradition'. They wanted to think in an effect-oriented way – oriented on something they would aim for and would want to accomplish in line with their goals. On many levels, this still holds true for the times in which we live. Experiencing beauty in worship, however, is about connecting to the Christian tradition, to symbols of the Christian faith; it is about experiencing the presence of God and finding meaning. This also explains the reason for participating in similar rituals in public: something that might *appear to be* 'useless' provides the space for something that resonates with us, creating a sense of a world that is more than the world we live in – a sense of God's world and God's presence.

Gräß (2011:327–331) describes the views of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1850) on liturgy as a work of art within which various forms of art function together to form a gripping whole, '*ein ergreifenden ganzen*', with the aim to communicate faith by means of aesthetic forms of presentation or performance. Emphasising the importance of the content of the Christian faith, Schleiermacher also makes it clear that sharing the Christian faith is not about providing *information on the content* of faith, but that it is about the sharing of a personal *religious emotion*, a feeling of dependence, an inner relation of trust in God: '*Glaubensmitteilung ist Existenzmitteilung*' (Schleiermacher 1850:71, in Gräß 2011:328). Reflecting on emotions connected to faith that break out involuntarily in the individual, such as joy, pain, hope and trust, the (liturgical) artist creates a work of art, an orderly form of presentation with objective content that affects the senses, as it is expressed visually and audibly through the performing arts, poetry, music, dance and architecture – thus emotions and religious experiences are represented as a work of art (the liturgy) that acts '*objectively*' in public. The determining factor in religious communication is not about bringing 'objective knowledge of content' but about the 'contagious effect' on the subject (Gräß 2011:329).

The essence of the liturgy as a work of art is about the influence that it exerts on the subject. Forms of art give worship its explicit shape that reaches into the depths of existential experience. Art provides the form for the religious experience of the individual to be transcended, so the

experience becomes an interpersonal, shared experience of emotion, faith and content. The art of the performance gives the liturgy its beauty. Where the liturgy is experienced as beautiful, a sustainable feeling of being connected in communal faith can develop. As a work of art expressing faith, the liturgy helps us to reflect on that which we hope for – it also indicates the actions that should flow from faith, thus including the ethical aspect (Schleiermacher 1850:79, in Gräb 2011:329–330).

Singing as the expression of emotions connected to faith

Art is not about itself – it is the form through which religious emotions or emotions of faith, connected to theological content, are expressed. The sharing of faith is about the sharing of one's existence. The performing arts as faith embodied are therefore indispensable in the liturgy (Schleiermacher 1850:79, in Gräb 2011:329), which is public in essence. Faith shared in the (more visible) public domain is equally dependent on the arts, and especially on singing. I reflected on the meaning of singing hymns in various contexts in the more explicit public square (Kloppers 2020) and sought to determine the possible reasons for singing in these contexts. It became clear that the possible motives are related to emotions and feelings often connected to religion, such as hope, reassurance, strength, friendship, love, grace, forgiveness, support, comfort, healing, gratitude, belonging, unity, community, encouragement, courage, resilience and identity – singing to praise God, experience the presence of God and feel a sense of transcendence, trust and truth, but also to voice lament, hurt, protest and resistance. When church services could not be held during the COVID-19 lockdown, churches and ministers of religion across the world were quick to provide opportunities for broadcasts and online worship in a multitude of forms. Some of the presentations were done well, and along the way those who struggled initially got better – but there were also presentations so *manipulated and controlled* by ministers *creating the impression of being authentic*, 'of being themselves and of being close to the people' (see Pfeijffer's description above), that attention was drawn rather to the minister or to the presentation itself, instead of 'the message' that the presentation wanted to communicate. To me the most *authentic* expressions of faith lived in public were not necessarily those services carefully constructed for the public sphere of the internet, but the singing of hymns and people making music from their balconies and windows, together with their neighbours, to support their communities, such as *Der Mond ist aufgegangen*, the beautiful evening song of Matthias Claudius, that was sung in Germany (Lebedew & Jenkner 2020). In Cape Town people sang the National Anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* (of which the first part is a 19th-century hymn), together at eight in the evening. This form of communal singing certainly could evoke childhood memories of religious singing in people who do not attend church anymore. Hearing old hymns sung this way could open old memories of faith slumbering in people and could unlock old

traces of emotion connected to faith. Even if people were not singing hymns, the singing in many cities and towns around the world was a powerful message of the power of music and of bodily participation, despite being at a distance from one another, as a medium to connect people, give comfort and create hope.

Old symbols of the Christian faith came alive in the time of the COVID pandemic, even in small gestures of lived religion. With reference to Jürgen Habermas, who, even if interested only in the secular possibilities of the idea, speaks of the 'truth potential' of religious traditions, Körtner (2020) stresses that also in a secular society, the gospel could spread liberating power. He argues that despite the *apparent* loss of relevance, new spaces (*Freiräume*) for the Christian religion can open unexpectedly – he also shows how it happened during the pandemic. Steffensky (2020) uses the narrowed-down ritual of the funeral of his brother-in-law, where singing was not allowed, as example to show how the old words, forms and rituals can provide for beauty and comfort in times of crisis. He argues that these forms and rituals can protect people against the glorification (*Verherrlichung*) of spontaneity and authenticity and could relieve the pressure of having to invent everything anew all the time. I agree and can emphasise that the singing of well-known hymns on balconies and in public was only possible because there were people who had hymns engraved in their collective cultural memory. Steffensky sees these singing events as moments of 'spontaneous playing' – of doing things that are not necessary and not essential, but that are important as moments of creating beauty that sustain people: 'When has hope survived, without the memory of beauty?' [*Wann ist die Hoffnung ohne die Erinnerung an die Schönheit ausgekommen?*] (Steffensky 2020).

The true or authentic expression of faith that is lived is not about repeating formal premises of beliefs of Christianity, but about sharing *religious emotions*, about conveying a subjective personal execution of existence (*Existenzvollzug*) (Schleiermacher 1850, cited in Gräb 2011:328). For Schleiermacher these emotions were strongly connected to the objective, theological content of the Christian faith. Gräb (2011:335) argues that current religious performances (*Inszenierungen*) within pop culture aim to stimulate spontaneous reactions, so that the performance could become a gripping event (*ergreifende Ereignis*) and a transformative experience for the participants, with the aim of binding them into a community, but that in these cultures the performative strength of the aesthetic lies more in the *dominance of the form* (the re-presentative symbolic, the scenes and images) than in the (theological) content and verbal formulations. Referring also to Bach's Mass in B Minor, Gräb reveals how music in itself can speak with a striking immediacy, and that simply through the 'epiphany of the form' of Bach's inspiring (*mitreißende*) music, faith in the resurrection could start in the heart of the listener. '*Ein solches Geschehen ist nicht machbar. Aber so kann Musik religiös bewegen*' (Gräb 2011:335); such an experience cannot be brought about – but music can move people on a religious level.

On Easter Sunday, 12 April 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the world-renowned singer Andrea Bocelli gave a solo performance in the Duomo of Milan that was broadcast worldwide. It represented a message of love, healing and hope to Italy and the world. Much attention was given to the setting and the form of the performance through which the message was communicated (see Gräß above), but still the attention was drawn to the content, to the message communicated. Proclaiming his own belief, Bocelli gave his reason for singing and praying through singing (Bocelli 2020):

I believe in the strength of praying together; I believe in the Christian Easter, a universal symbol of rebirth that everyone – whether they are believers or not – truly needs right now. (n.p.)

He concluded the performance by singing *Amazing Grace*, standing in front of the cathedral, symbolising the Christian message of hope, carried from the public sphere of the church to the more visible public sphere – thus signifying that it is meant for all people, whether they accept the message as hope connected to the Christian faith with the content of the Christian faith, or as a *diaconal gesture*: hope offered to them by someone who adheres to the Christian faith. A few days on, the performance had almost 40 million views in the public sphere of YouTube. Through the autonomous effect of beauty, in the *space for resonance* (Rosa 2016), a sense of the infinite was opened up and a space for meeting God and others was created, confirming that texts, music and other forms of art could resonate with people and mirror something of the beauty (of God) and the truth (of God) amidst the horrors of the present situation.

Art, poetry and music can unsettle and disturb us. The arts can guide us deeper than all structures, than all autonomy, than all concepts of ourselves. The arts can let the world appear in forms of possibilities, very different from what the world is in reality. Poetry and music point to another world, far beyond the conceivable, far back to the beginnings, deep into the impossible – all of these are the roads and the ways of art. They have no goal; they happen in going, in making, *in performing* (Lehnert 2019:74, my translation and emphasis).

Conclusion: A sounding public theology

The singing of hymns in the public sphere constitutes a form of publicly lived religion. When the singing is *reflected upon and discussed* in the public media – also in social media – it can be seen as a form of *public theology* (Bubmann 2017a:152). Theologians who analyse the use of rituals and symbols in the public sphere are important, but even more important are theologians who perform a practical theology, aware of the subtle embodiments of religion in the public sphere and the non-verbal means of communication that resonate in the body. The aesthetic form of the performance contributes to the strength of the ritual, the music, the singing, also in the

public sphere. Constituting the form of every performance are the arts that perform (work) together – engaged poetry, imaginative texts, strong images, inspiring music and creative dance all of which combine to form a work of art with gripping effect, so enthralling that people can be transformed. This is also true for the performance of theological reflection. What is needed most are theologians who are acquainted with the imagery and histories of the Bible and who are artists, true poets who can open up texts, give new form and creatively speak a new language and a new captivating truth and thereby regain a foothold in the non-argumentative and non-linguistic discourses of the public square and in the *imagination* of late-modern, post-secular and secular people. What remains open is to engage further with the creative ways in which a public practical theology is practised by theologians such as Troeger (2010, 2015), Lehnert (2019), Pratt (2015) and Steffensky (2020), who in a recent article refers to Dorothee Sölle's argument that we should *praise without lying*, '*Loben ohne zu lügen*' – the essence of what I argue for in this article. These are theologians who reflect deeply on issues in the current public sphere (the politics, the master narratives, the fake news, the gods, the wars, the illnesses and the plight of the earth) but also people who are truly gifted in addressing these issues in poetry, in hymn texts and creative writing, giving form and voice to a theology that is performed, sung, practised, experienced and heard in the public sphere.

This article is the expanded second part of a public lecture that I held at the end of February 2020, only days before the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in full. I chose a format different from the usual to present the lecture by including singing and by weaving narratives together, allowing aspects of theology, history, music and lived faith to emerge from the bigger narrative in an organic way, opening up a space for resonance so the listeners could be drawn in as participants into a *performance of practical theology*, a *sounding public theology* or '*klingende öffentliche Theologie*' (Wabel, Höhne & Stamer 2017:9). I argued that hymn singing is a religious and cultural force that contributes to a crossing of borders between the 'sacred' and the 'profane', between nearness and transcendence, between people, between nations, between times past, times present and times future, reflecting theologically on what can be called the *anamnetic* dimension (the memory of the past and, especially, the past made present by remembering), the *proleptic* dimension (looking to the future) and the *transformative* dimension of hymn singing in public. Singing the short abstract from the Lord's Prayer, *Mayenziwe 'ntando yakho* [Your will be done on earth, O Lord], together at the end of my lecture, was meant as an act in public uniting people from various backgrounds, cultures, languages and histories. My closing words were focussed on bodily participation, on perceiving each other, listening to each other, opening up for one another – on singing *as if we have lived for this moment to sing*, embodying God's presence through our singing, singing against gravity and against death, and in doing so, creating truth and giving hope. Little had I realised that it would be one of the last opportunities to sing physically together, for months to come.

Art, and singing as a form of art, is about dealing with the inexplicable, about speaking the unspeakable. Or about the opposite: the endurance of speechlessness (*Sprachlosigkeit*), the living with unanswerable questions, the dealing with unresolvable problems (Marti 2016). In a world of fake news, we are used to answers being given too easily – we drown in a sea of answers (Gräß 2011:337). A religion that is lived keeps awake the questions for which there are no final answers. It is the veiled truth – the uncertain truth in the old and new spiritual songs and hymns that allows for singing to become an existential, gripping experience, an *'existentiell ergreifenden Erfahrung'* (Gräß 2011:338). In these times of uncertainty, indifference, untruth, fear and serious illness, it is beauty in music and art that keeps awake *the sense of truth*, the sense of the transcendent and the hope for healing. In sounding the sacred amidst the silence and the brokenness, in singing what we anticipate and what we hope for, the world that is yet to come is made present.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this research article.

Author's contributions

E.K. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (no. Rec-240816-052).

Funding information

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

Data availability statement

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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