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Unpacking the meanings of 'virtual spirituality' in Vuyani Vellem's critique of Empire

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The modest goal of this article is to creatively unpack and render more accessible (mainly by means of cultural illustrations) Vuyani Vellem's account of the virtual spirituality of Empire. Geared towards the maximisation of the economic profit by the elite at the expense of the poor, today's Empire is a result of the unprecedented convergence of the military, political, economic and cultural powers, along with advanced sciences and technologies. All these forces are mediated through a particular kind of *deadly* spirituality, which is propelled chiefly through virtual images. Whether it manifests itself through an act of a political manipulation or through unconscious assimilation of the historically oppressive forms of religiosity, an imperial logic invariably leads to the 'capture' of the spiritual assets for political and/or economic ends, instead of God. As such, it reveals the fundamental incompatibility of these resources with their source of inspiration. What Vellem refers to as virtual spirituality appears, then, as a fatal disequilibrium of powers between the innermost being and the exterior. Whilst Empire's 'hardware' in an age of informatics consists primarily of weapons of war, its 'software' ranges from ubiquitous marketing imagery to the variety of fetishised cultural-religious symbols. A virtual *modus operandi* implies that images are deceptively projected as 'needs' rather than 'wants', and an unsatisfiable spiritual hunger is generated. As such, it is utterly self-referential. By contrast, an authentic experience of participating in the world process finds its congruent expressions in the public domain and notably in the spiritual praxis of liberation.

Contribution: This academic article contributes to sustainable goals such as poverty alleviation, combatting inequalities, good health and well-being, and peace, justice and strong institutions.

Keywords: African Christianity; black faith; disequilibrium; empire; ethos; image; imperial; informatics; spirit; virtual; virtual spirituality; Vuyani Vellem.

'*Ngihamba lakho*': My small tribute to a great person

I was introduced to Prof. Vuyani Vellem by our mutual friend, Prof. Graham Duncan, when I started my postdoctoral fellowship at the (then) Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, in 2013. The day I first met him, I remember being somewhat intimidated by his profound voice, loud laughter (he was one of the few at the Faculty who could compete with my then mentor, Prof. Duncan, in this regard) and his earthy jokes about white racists controlling the church. But, unlike in some other cases, I did not feel judged by him. Professor Vellem, whilst being candid and upfront, embraced me the way I was back then: a bit scared, a bit too serious and ambitious about my academic career, and perhaps a bit too self-righteous about my commitment to 'things black'. I knew I met a *real person*, well-grounded in his cultural and theological heritage.

Every inch a Xhosa man and, despite all his criticism of church politics, every inch a committed Presbyterian churchman, unpretentious and authentic as he was, Prof. Vellem simply did not need to wear masks. But I believe it was also part of his deliberate choice, as one of the relatively few black academics at the Faculty at that time. In my eyes, that was his way of bearing a prophetic witness *on the edge of the inside* (Rohr 2014:34), particularly *vis-à-vis* racism in the church and in the academy. To recall the phrase Prof. Maluleke used in his eulogy, it was in such a context that Prof. Vellem's anger – this 'raging fire … put out so suddenly and, to our mind, so prematurely' (Maluleke 2020), would leave some feeling challenged or even threatened, and others – inspired and empowered to confront and name the (often ugly) reality of our hugely untransformed society.

It would be fair to say, I guess, that Prof. Vellem has become something of an informal mentor to me, even though he has always treated me like an equal – a colleague and a research collaborator

(in fact, I found the way he used to address me in the many messages we have exchanged over years, slightly bewildering: he would call me interchangeably 'Bro' and 'Prof'). I must admit that it wasn't until a few years after I first met him that I realised that I have been dealing with one of the most distinguished Black Theologians of our day. In fact, it was thanks to my engaging with the work of Prof. Vellem and Prof. Tinyiko Maluleke (both of whom I had encountered through Prof. Duncan) that a 'contextual shift' has occurred in my own research. This shift has made me realise that I need to start by listening (especially to black voices, past and present) and by *opening/voiding spaces*, rather than filling them with my own (white privileged) perspectives. Professor Vellem was the one who, after reading some of my papers, would advise me that, whilst engaging with the issues of racial injustice, I cannot speak from perspective other than my own or pursue questions which are not mine. To me, these were priceless lessons about the difference between what McKenzie aptly described as an 'ally theatre' (McKenzie 2015) and an authentic solidarity, which always comes costly.

If I was to point to one thing that Prof. Vellem has taught me, it would be precisely that: not to wear masks, but to embrace who 'I am in God's sight, nothing more, nothing less' (St Francis of Assisi), and carry on, on *my own* journey, wherever it takes me, without pretence and without letting any idea(l)s – no matter how sophisticated or noble – overshadow the reality of my embeddedness in *here and now*. I believe that the essence of this attitude is well captured in the Ndebele expression, to which I was recently introduced, namely '*Ngihamba lakho*' [lit. 'I go with it', meaning 'I journey with whatever is there, whatever life brings'].

Over the last few years, I have had an honour to work with Prof. Vellem in a number of contexts. Amongst other things, he accepted my invitation to teach an MPhil module in African Theology at St Augustine College, a Catholic university in Johannesburg, where I have been working for the past 10 years. In 2017, he gave a public lecture at St Augustine. Subsequently, he published an article in our in-house journal on '*Iimanyano* Singing *Siyakudumisa*: Ambivalent Worship and the Reformed Tradition in South Africa' (Vellem 2018). Professor Vellem invited me to review a number of articles for the volumes of which he was an editor and to contribute to two of them, namely those dedicated to James Cone.

But it was during the informal meetings – occasional coffees, lunches and dinners – that I felt most humbled and privileged to be able to listen to his stories (what an exquisite story teller he was!). In many of these stories, themes in African history and Black Theology were almost poetically interwoven with those from his personal life, including his current experience – that of a 'Black Man in a White World',[1] persistently resisting the pressure to be *assimilated* and *domesticated* as a price for his inclusion in 'the system'. And yet he would never let bitterness or cynicism have the

1. A title of a song by Michael Kiwanuka, https://bit.ly/2YBEciA.

last word. Ultimately, his hope was not in politics – be it that of the church or state, nor in an idea of God that could all too easily turn into an idol and lend itself to an imperial logic of death, nor in any 'vision' (even one as close to his heart as *VukaniBantuTsohangBatho*), but in *isiswe*, 'a people cognizant of their oppression and having taken the decision to struggle against their oppression and for freedom, justice and dignity' (Boesak 2017:xviii; Vellem 2017:6).

Throughout all our interactions, I found his realistic and subversive – at times, indeed, soberingly unsettling – account of the status quo to be *soothed*, as it were, with his 'laughter, black and streaming' (Angelou 2015:41). Vuyani championed that wonderful art, not uncommon amongst black Africans, which continues to mesmerise and inspire me: the capacity to cry and laugh at the same time; to curse and bless in the same sentence; and to *dine with the ancestors*, whilst at the same time making a *stranger*, like me, feel at home.

Last time, I met him in person in Soweto, in 2018, at the conference on 'Religion & Racial Justice in South Africa and the United States', which was opened by the conversation between him and Prof. Jeannine Hill-Fletcher of Fordham University, New York. Afterwards, we exchanged a few emails in which he elaborated on his insights on spirit(uality) of Empire and referred me to a few relevant sources. We agreed to meet for lunch, but this has never come to pass.

Upon the invitation to contribute to the current volume, I read through all my correspondence with Prof. Vellem between 2014 and 2019 and re-read all his articles to which I have an access. In what follows, I would like to pay my small tribute to a great man who was my mentor, colleague and – dare I say – friend. I will do so by engaging with his critique of the spirit/ethos of Empire and, more specifically, of 'virtual spirituality'.

Professor Vellem's theological writings are not always easy to penetrate, to say the least. Some avoid them because of their personal ideological bias; others – I have witnessed it among a number of my students – 'give up' because of the density of his language, often lavished with metaphors and references to indigenous terms. Whilst the former group is probably *beyond help*, the latter may simply need some guidance through his ideas. This will be my modest goal in this article: to unpack and render more accessible (chiefly by means of his own as well as some arbitrarily chosen cultural illustrations) Prof. Vellem's account of the virtual spirituality of Empire. In the process, I am going to, inevitably, (re-)interpret it; and I will do so primarily by drawing on Alexander Galloway's notion of interface.

Spirituality of Empire as an antithesis of life: Delving into Vellem's critique

As a subject of debate and contestation, the notion of Empire occupies a very significant, if not central, position in Vellem's

reflection. He uses it as shorthand for his social analysis, drawing on a myriad of works that have been published since the adoption of the Accra Confession in 2004 (Vellem 2014a:1; see also Koshy 2006; Vellem 2012). Essentially, it is the meaning that the Accra Confession attributes to this notion that provides the frame of reference for Vellem (2014a:3, 2016:4):

> [… T]he current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral economic system defended by empire. In using the term 'empire' we mean the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests. (…) We see the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of economic globalization and geopolitics backed by neoliberal ideology. (AC 2004:§11; §14; see also Koshy 2006:336ff.)

Boesak, Weusmann and Amjad-Ali (2010) further elaborated on the specifically *spiritual* dimension of Empire by describing it in terms of:

> [*A*] reality and *a spirit* of lordless domination, created by humankind … a pervasive *spirit* of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed. It is a colonisation of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; *a spirit* lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life. (p. 23; [*author's own italics*])

This is precisely the aspect of Empire that has been particularly problematised and elucidated in Vellem's theology – one that I deem most original and thought-provoking, and thus worth further interrogation.

Let us first unpack what Vellem means when he speaks of 'the relationship between power configurations of Empire and spirituality' (2016:2), and Empire's own 'spirit' or, more seldom, 'ethos'. In his 2016 article on '*Imvuselelo*: Embers of Liberation in South Africa post-1994', he seeks to capture a spirituality of decolonial rebellion *à la* Fanon (Fanon [1961] 2004:45–52; see also Vellem 2016:2) and its concomitant 'mental liberation' (Gibson 2015:18).[2] Both of them underpin black African theology and are, as such, the antithesis of the spirituality of Empire. To accomplish this task, Vellem puts forward the metaphor of *Imvuselelo* [loosely meaning 'revival' or 'renewal']. He describes *Imvuselelo* as a form of liturgy 'boisterous with African style and flair', a 'dialogical celebration of worship' in which 'ordinary members take part in preaching and share equally in the proceedings of the service' (2016:2). The concept of Empire and its underlying spirituality implies *ipso facto* the existence of the poor, the 'scum of the earth' (Vellem 2014b:2013), whose spirituality Vellem describes, after Nigel Gibson, in terms of 'a struggle against daily "living death"' (Gibson 2011:xii–xiii; see also Vellem 2014b:209). The two exist *dialectically* and can only be understood in mutual relation *vis-à-vis* each other. In

the context of black faith, Vellem posits that 'the poor who live even though disemboweled' (Vellem 2014b:214) demonstrate and embody the resurrection of Jesus (see also Boff 1989:37). He thus interprets 'the robust singing, dance and ecstatic expressions, yelling, shouting and spending the whole night in worship, typical of an *Imvuselelo* service' (2016:2) and standing in stark contrast to 'the formal liturgical orders inherited from the West' (2014b:3) as a symbolic expression of 'the type of faith that is found in those who "live in living death"' (2014b:208). This spiritual praxis can be used, Vellem argues, as 'a thermometer to measure the sanity of an oppressed people' (2016:2), as it indicated its capacity to cope with economic exploitation and inequity under the neoliberal hegemony, undergirded by an imperial logic of death (2014b:213).

It is from this perspective that Vellem asks momentous questions about the possibility of convergence between Western Christianity and black faith. At times, his bleak account and diagnosis of the status quo seem to settle the issue, like when he states that 'the level of ideological contestation between orthodox forms of Christianity and Black praxis has attained irreconcilable dimensions' (2014b:213). In his view, in our global context of '*Homo Oeconomicus*, where everything is measured according to the logic of profit' (2014b:208), Christian faith manifests in forms that are, at core, incongruous. Spiritual praxis of those on the underside of history is in contest with the 'death-dealing culture of "Baalism"' (2014b:213), which *masquerades* as Christian faith.[3] But the latter can hardly be reduced to a mere distortion of Christian faith. Indeed, from the historical and cultural perspective of the neoliberal hegemony, those imperial forms of spirituality amount to the *mainstream* of Western Christianity, whilst black faith exists *on the peripheries*, as a site of (by and large covert) prophetic resistance. In the modern era, 'the inexorable idols of racism, imperialism, colonization, and Christianization' (2014b:213) cannot be separated; what is more, they are all 'manifest in the political and economic heresies of the twenty-first century' (2014b:213). Put straightforwardly, not only does Vellem conceive of Western Christianity as 'an expansionist religion concomitant with [*capitalist*] modernity', and thereby with 'the cultural subjugation … [*and*] terror as experienced by Black Africans' under colonial and apartheid rule (Vellem 2014a:3,1), but he also deems it a tool used by Empire in Africa today, in its generally 'more concealed and sophisticated assault on the imagination and consciousness of Black Africans' (Urbaniak 2019:227; see also Vellem 2014a:1).

Vellem holds that inclusion remains one of the most deadly strategies assumed by today's Empire to subvert Africanness, because it implies assimilation of African identity and may ultimately lead to the 'death of consciousness' (2014a:4). Going back to the metaphor of *Imvuselelo*, he illustrates the

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2. Tiyo Soga's 'militant spirit' is another historical reference used by Vellem in this context (Khabela 1996:32–33).

3. By reducing political questions to economic ones, the 'Baals' (false gods) of the twenty-first century bring about the fragmentation of public life 'which results in "the inequitable distribution of power between the spheres"' (2014b:213; see also Deetz 1992:2).

mechanism of imperial inclusion by referring to the case of 'taming', 'domesticating' and 'capturing' this liturgical symbol by the African National Congress (ANC). To him, this amounts to 'usurping the space devoted for the worship of God' (2016:3) by means of a populist rhetoric and for political reasons. What may at first appear as the inclusion of, and drawing upon, the resources of Christian faith for the purposes of social transformation is de facto a symptom of 'the rampant divorce of the spiritual from the political in public life' (2016:3). When the party like the ANC posits economic dreams of the people as 'equal to the comprehensive promises and significations of *Imvuselelo*' (2016:3), Vellem maintains, a public domain becomes an arena for a struggle of the deadly gods ('Baals') of Empire and the living God of black faith (2016:3).

Following the same logic, I would like to suggest that this observation can be extrapolated with regard to intra-Christian dynamics: Insofar as African Christians understand, define and articulate their faith according to its being *genealogically* and/or *ideologically* included in and belonging to the idolatrous and deadly stream of Western Christianity – rather than standing in stark contrast to it, they de facto fell prey to Empire's strategy of 'conquest by embracing' (Küng 1988:236) and thus *buy into* its grand deception.

It is in this spirit, I believe, that Vellem examines the paradoxical ubiquity, amongst African Christians, of Western Eurocentric symbols of worship such as *Siyakudumisa* (isiXhosa for *Te Deum Laudamus*). But more significantly, he differentiates between the *imperial* and the *liberationist* acts of singing this prayer-chant. He does so by juxtaposing two historically coinciding moments, namely *Siyakudumisa* being sung by black women and men in the dungeons of the Elmina Castle in Ghana, a '"temple" of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade' (2018:77), and the same hymn – *Te Deum Laudamus* – being sung above them, in the Dutch Reformed Church, by their oppressors. Thus, on the one hand, he conceives of it as an 'anthem of land dispossession' (2018:81) and the genocide of black people, which glorifies the conquerors and worships the myth of the superiority of one race (2018:81). On the other hand, however, he points to its subversive potential by situating it in the context of the black African worship characteristic of *Iimanyano* (church sodalities). This is where African religiosity may (and does) become the site of liberation spirituality (Vellem 2014a:1). Calling for the departure from idolatrous customs of worship, which enhance the deadly ethos of Empire, Vellem thus postulates that 'the poor and the exploited … must liberate *Siyakudumisa* so that *Siyakudumisa* may liberate them' (2018:89). As I posited elsewhere (Urbaniak 2019:227), another example (albeit highly contested) of a *perverse* imperial inclusion effected theologically ('perverse' because it essentially serves the purposes of exclusion) can be found in the overall success, on the part of the fundamentalist churches,[4] in indoctrinating many of African charismatic Christians into believing that

the hostile attitude towards the LGBTI persons and the denial of their rights constitute a moral requirement of Christian faith as such. Not only is it an aberration of the gospel, but, tellingly, it also implies subversion of traditional African values by Western Christianity (Chitando & van Klinken 2019; Hackam 2018; Mhaka 2018).

Here, I believe, we approach the very core of Vellem's argument regarding the spirit(uality) of Empire. Whether it manifests itself through an act of a populist manipulation by politicians or by church leaders, or through unconscious assimilation of the historically oppressive forms of religiosity, it invariably results in the 'capture' of the spiritual assets/resources 'for political and economic ends instead of God' (2016:4) and, as such, reveals the fundamental 'incompatibility of [these] spiritual resources with their source of inspiration' (Vellem 2016:1). Originally, Christian spiritual praxis was inspired (and principally, it can only be inspired) by 'God's *kerugma* of the good news of liberation in [and from] repressive and oppressive conditions' (2016:3). But this 'inspiration' radically collides with 'the *doxa* of [an idolatrous] worship imagined through a religious monologue of Empire' (Vellem 2018:90). Its ethos has nothing to do with the liberation of the other; instead, it is all about 'a fetishized self-referential glorification' (2018:90).

Ultimately this *self-glorification* amounts to the maximisation of the 'profit and pleasure' (2016:4) by the elite. But socio-political, economic and, at times, also military tools used by Empire to accomplish that goal – what could be labelled as an 'imperial hardware' – could not perform their function efficiently without an 'imperial software', that is, Empire's own spirituality or ethos. In Vellem's (2016) own words:

> [S]ocietal structures and powers … have their own *fetish*. A fetish is a spirit, a dangerous one exhibited by structures of tyrannical power. The current world and its economic structures exhibit its own spirit. (p. 4)

This imperial spirit(uality) draws, *inter alia*, upon the mythical symbols being continually (re-)constructed in the domains of culture, politics and economics. Speaking of the last type, Vellem mentions 'the gross national product, the inflation rates, the price of crude oil, and the strength of the currency' (2014b:213) as common examples. However, on their own, 'mythical economic symbols' (2014b:213) like these would, once again, prove utterly insufficient. An imperial software could not function properly without them being coupled with the already existing cultural and religious symbols that are deeply rooted in people's inter-generational imagination, along with attitudes, beliefs and practices undergirded by such symbols. This is what Vellem summarily refers to as '"spiritual assets" or spiritual resources that keep people alive, "coals" that burn in a "fireplace" [*iziko*] of our public life' (2016:3). As already demonstrated, Empire *includes* and *assimilates* such spiritual resources, not least those inherent in Christian faith, into its 'software toolbox' by *alienating* them from their original source of inspiration and natural (historic and hermeneutic) 'habitat'.

4.Some of these churches, one should add, are financially sponsored and theologically/ideologically influenced by the ultra-conservative American Evangelicals (Campbell 2015; Tengatenga 2019:167–176; Urbaniak 2018:135; Wendland 2005).

Virtual spirituality and the disequilibrium of powers: The workings of Empire in an age of informatics

For Vellem's account of the spirituality of Empire to be complete, we have to ask: *How* does this process occur? What specific techniques and strategies allow today's Empire to effect such a grand deception and manipulation? It is at this stage that we turn to Vellem's critique of the 'virtual' aspect of an imperial spirituality.

As we have seen, the triumph of 'a spirit of lordless domination' (2016:2) is made possible by a malignant 'symbiosis of the differentiated spheres of public life' (2016:5), including multi-dimensional and interrelated powers such as the military, the political, the economic and the cultural, as well as advanced sciences and technologies (2016:4;5), all of which are 'mediated through … a particular kind of spirituality that is clearly anti-life' (2016:5).[5] In the present day, this unprecedented convergence of the deadly forces is 'propelled [above all] through virtual images' (2016:6). In Vellem's line of argument, 'the virtual' appears as synonymous with 'fake', 'superficial', 'deceptive' and 'utterly pragmatist'. This is how he characterises today's hegemonic culture in the world that 'has shifted into informatics', that is, 'the collection of information that constitutes anything on earth into bytes' (2016:5).[6] Vellem seems to posit that Empire *employs* informatics for its own ends, and what emerges from this *alliance* is precisely 'virtual spirituality' (2016:5). The said 'mechanism' is predicated upon the toxic symbiosis of the global order of economics and informatics (2016:5). It is not entirely clear, based on Vellem's analysis, whether there is something inherently *deadly* about informatics (and its chief product, a virtual image) that renders it particularly susceptible to Empire's strategies or whether Empire simply highjacks and abuses informatics, the same way it does with regard to religious symbols, amongst others. But as Vellem emphasises that 'computer science and robotics are paradigms of knowledge that equally exhibit their own spirit' (2016:5), it seems likely that in his mind, these 'paradigms of knowledge' naturally lend themselves to an imperial logic of deception.

This is one of the most elusive, but – to me – also one of the most intriguing, insights into Vellem's critique of Empire. If I am correct to assume that he conceives of virtual spirituality (i.e. spirituality that is propelled mainly by means of informatics and in particular through virtual images) as having a certain *inherently imperial* quality, then

his interpretation could be called into question by Galloway's notion of interface.

Unlike Vellem's, Alexander Galloway's insight into the logic of digital culture of today's world is not only grounded in humanities (in Galloway's case, mainly philosophy and cultural theory) but also driven by his close readings of video games, software, television, painting and other images permeating public domain. His focus on the interface as the most emblematic and ubiquitous manifestation of digital culture leads him to the conclusion that software has *de facto* 'superseded ideology by being able to act as "pure digital simulation"' (Galloway 2012:52; see also Han 2020:10).[7] Ideology inevitably presumes a certain ontology; it is always based on a 'narrative' and thus requires constant decoding (2012:71) – what Black Liberation Theologians like Vellem tend to describe in terms of disclosure, deconstruction, resistance or even debunking. Software, with a virtual image as its pivotal *means of expression*, 'provide[s] an ethics (and crucially *not* an ontology)' (Han 2020:10). The shift in primacy from the 'ideological' regime to the 'ethical' regime that, according to Galloway, we are witnessing today implies that 'ideology gets *modeled* in software' (Galloway 2012:52). From this point of view, simulation can be seen as an 'imaginary relationship to ideological conditions' (2012:52). In its ability to 'simulate' (i.e. construct worlds), software, therefore, brings about the 'death of the ideological regime' (2012:62), like the one that underlies an imperial order.

If Empire indeed thrives on 'the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of economic globalization and geopolitics *backed by neoliberal ideology*' (AC 2004:§11; my italics), then it would appear that *the virtual* has a potential to subvert rather than to enhance Empire's hold over those who 'live in living death' (Vellem 2014b:208). Thus for Galloway, interface signifies 'mediation *beyond* representation, language and, effectively, ideology' (Han 2020:11). He describes it as an unworkable medium; the one that does not mediate does not *tell any story*. It often deceptively presents itself 'as a door or a window or some other sort of threshold across which we must simply step to receive the bounty beyond' (Galloway 2012:159). To use a different 'language game', one could say that interface acts like an *icon*, whilst in reality it is an *idol*.

Galloway has nothing to say specifically about spirituality (or about virtual spirituality in particular). But his sporadic references to 'ethos' display a certain *family resemblance* in relation to Vellem's critique of Empire's spirit/virtual spirituality.

There is at least one significant point on which Vellem and Galloway appear to be in agreement. It concerns the symbiosis of economics and informatics. Like Vellem, Galloway also believes that it is 'digital culture that allows ludic capitalism to operate' (Han 2020:10; see also Galloway 2012:29). Their views on the interdependence (or a mutual

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5. The *lethal* quality inherent in an imperial spirituality is to be understood in both radical and totalistic sense. Although it is the poor who are the immediate victims of Empire's deadly exploitation, in the long run its evil spirit must consume everything. Far from being self-sustainable, Empire appears in fact as a self-destructive system, doomed to fail. Drawing on the views of Yong-Bock Kim (2009:185–186), Vellem posits that the signs of our times point to a global trend – be it geo-political, economic or ecological – towards the total destruction of life on earth (Vellem 2016:5).

6. Following Boff, Vellem asserts that 'all beings, alive or not, are the carriers of particular data that can be assessed and measured in bytes (binary digit), and stored in computers' (Boff 2014:6; see also Vellem 2016:5).

7. Ideology is understood here according to Althusser's classical definition as 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (1971:162).

correlation) between informatics and the 'spirit' of the hegemonic culture are where they seem to differ. In contrast to Vellem, to whom the two appear inexorably bound together, Galloway (2012) emphasises that:

> [P]assing from ideological regime to the ethical regime does *not* mean that today's climate is any more or less 'ethical' (in the sense of good deed doing) or more or less politicized than the past … [E]thical mode … adopts various normative techniques wherein given aesthetic dominants are shattered … in the service of *a specific desired ethos.* (p. 52; [*author's own italics*])

This suggests that, compared to Vellem, Galloway sees the *ethical dimension* of informatics and digital culture at large as more *malleable*. On the one hand, it may be – and often is – at odds with mental liberation (Gibson 2015:18). 'What was once an intellectual intervention' – Galloway observes – 'is now part of the mechanical infrastructure' (2012:9). Subversive voices from the margins are stifled and silenced, whereas any critique that sees daylight 'is being co-opted as fuel for the new spirit of capitalism' (2012:9–10; see also Boltanski & Chiapello 2018). But, on the other hand, digital culture with its virtual images may also – and often does – serve as a fertile ground or a catalyst to 'the open sourcing of the media systems (information wants to be free, desire wants to be free, capital wants to be free)' (2012:10).

Mark Hansen's notion of 'affective interfacing' (2003:2006)[8] takes the possibility of a *humanly constructive* engagement with the present-day 'software' even a step farther. As mentioned earlier, Vellem juxtaposes the detached observation, which is capable merely of generating and sustaining a *marketing-based culture of images*, the fully human acts of social participation and action (Vellem 2015b:2, 2018:82). By contrast, Hansen's idea implies that, through the process of 'facialisation' (a form of 'overcoding'), some virtual images have a capacity to '"jar" a viewer into a sort of participant' (Han 2020:11; see also Hansen 2003:2007).

Here, thrown in merely as a 'digression', this kind of engagement between the work of Vellem and that of other contemporary authors who have grappled with the issues of digital/virtual culture/spirituality shall be continued elsewhere. Now, back to Vellem himself.

The world has increasingly become a spectacle, a big theatre. One of the common aspects of the universal impact of the virtual culture on our lives is that 'our individual personal identity is increasingly the projection of our own particular image in society' (Boff 2014:10). A human person takes part in this show either 'in a direct manner, as participant actor, or indirectly through imagination and images' (Boff 2014:11). Vellem maintains that the lives of most people are reduced to the latter. This status quo is organically linked to the role that virtual imagery plays in economy at large, particularly in marketing. In his own words:

> In a world where production is cheap …, the shift has become much more related to the distribution … of the product. So,

8.Hansen developed this notion based on his empirical studies that incorporated digitally enhanced images of faces – in his words, 'interfaces of faces' (2003:206).

while it is cheap and fast to produce, it is difficult to sell. Marketing is now the central locus of our challenges in this world. The question is 'How do we arouse needs in consumers?' Cultural goods, cinema, music, photography, design and fashion are among the aspects that are tamed to produce images of marketing that arouse the need in consumers. Most of these are simply 'wants' in economic terms, but they are driven and imaged as 'needs'. (Vellem 2016:5)

By creating images that are virtual and not real, and which are deceptively projected as 'needs' rather than 'wants', global marketing continuously arouses consumer's 'desire for need', which can never be ultimately fulfilled. As an unavoidable correlate or 'side effect' of this process, a virtual spiritual hunger is generated. Vellem sees this thirst for spirituality as a key factor in globalisation (2016:5). It may basically lead to three types of outcome: (1) escapism (2016:4), (2) succumbing to the spirit of Empire (of which Vellem conceives in conjunction with 'the domestication of spiritual assets' [2016:5]) or (3) resisting the spirit of the current world and its economic structures (Vellem 2015a:2). The latter implies reclaiming a spirituality which is worth its name, that is, one that brings life and not death, harmony rather than rupture, and which manifests through social participation and action and not merely through imagination and images (Vellem 2015b:2, 2018:82). Not surprisingly, a *virtual mode of operating in the world* is juxtaposed in Vellem's thought with the authentic inner experience which is embodied in outer attitudes and life-shaping choices, or – to use Boff's phrase – with 'the dialogue that lies within, and how we mediate the inner and external worlds we inhabit' (2014:10).

In either case, no one is *ipso facto* immune to Empire's virtual spirituality. What lies at its core is a fatal rupture 'between the innermost harmony and the exterior harmony' (2016:5). Such a disequilibrium of powers is the crux of the matter as far as Vellem's insight into the inner workings of Empire in an age of informatics is concerned. If the power of spirituality is indeed 'created at the intersection of inwardness and externality' (Pasewark 1993:220), for spirituality to be life-giving, *communication* and equilibrium at the borders between interior and exterior harmony are needed (Vellem 2016:5). Put simply:

> Spirituality is the capacity of human beings to connect their inner most thoughts, entering into harmony with their innermost pleas. [*But*] this connection [*also*] requires equal harmony with the exterior. Sometimes even if this interior harmony is achieved, the exterior disharmony can easily disrupt and even rupture it. (2016:5; see also Boff 2014:11)

Because of the toxic symbiosis of the global order of economics and informatics, amongst other factors, the opposite becomes the case: the 'disequilibrium happens in the inward part' (2016:5), because – as we have seen – the source of inspiration is in dissonance with spiritual resources themselves.

Vellem illustrates this by referring to the African values of *ubuntu* which – in the context of Empire – are 'destroyed by

the configuration of power which distorts need and want through virtual image' (2016:6). Perhaps the image of the 'rainbow nation' could serve as a case in point, because, arguably, it entails the sort of disharmony of powers that Vellem posits as something constitutive of virtual spirituality. For instance, from the perspective of the South African #MustFall movements that have begun in 2015,[9] what stands out is the students' disillusionment with the rainbow nation narrative and their fight against:

> [A] [post-1994] status quo that entrenched the belief that we are all equal, but some are 'more' equal than others. A status quo that assumes the double consciousness that took hold in our country to be unassailable. (Chikane 2018:2)

What is more, a number of authors have sought, in the recent years, to denounce the manipulative lie behind the false unity and forced homogeneity inherent in post-1994 rainbowism, which – in their view – has de facto served to protect white privilege and thus maintain the inequitable distribution of power.[10] In the words of Vellem (2014a):

> [W]hilst South Africa attained its political liberation 20 years ago, its economic policies have been trapped in the dictates of the Washington Consensus, and poverty, inequality of unemployment have worsened since the demise of apartheid. (…) Whilst there seems to be no violent confrontation between the oppressed and the beneficiaries of the oppressive regime of the past, it cannot be disputed that the hegemony of neoliberal economics generally benefits the beneficiaries of apartheid. (p. 4)

Vellem compares spiritual resources to '"coals" that burn in a "fireplace" of our public life' (2016:3), as he recalls a well-known saying that 'it takes one coal from a neighbour's fireplace to revive another neighbour's fire place' (2016:2). However, when virtual spirituality of Empire masquerades as something inherent in African culture or black faith, instead of spreading the fire (i.e. enlivening the spiritual assets for the common good), the coals serve to capture and domesticate fire by self-combustion (2016:4). To paraphrase his statement, in such a case, 'the vibrant communal life' that is communicated in African household, religiosity and culture at large 'to maintain harmony and to affirm life miscommunicates with the "coals"' (2016:5). In other words, 'spiritual assets' of Empire, insofar as they pertain to the public life, are at odds with their source of inspiration, internal power and dynamism (2016:5). As a result, 'communication at the borders between the innermost harmony and the exterior harmony of the powers' (2016:5) cannot occur; and without such an efficacious communication, there is no spirituality that would be capable of producing life.

To sum up, in contrast to a living political being, who is honest and trustworthy about reality, and who shows fidelity to the disemboweled, 'disequilibrium in the force-field between the innermost being and the exterior destroys life by creating virtual zoon political [sic]'[11] (2016:6). The latter is a 'robotic being' who/which is a victim of self-deception and whose only commitment is to virtual images (2016:6). Whilst Empire's 'hardware' in an age of informatics consists primarily of weapons of war, its 'software' – that is, its virtual spirituality – ranges from ubiquitous marketing imagery to the variety of fetishised cultural and religious symbols and metaphors, all of which 'distort need and want in the images of the current world-show' (2016:6). Put in simpler terms, a virtual modus operandi implies that images are deceptively projected as 'needs' rather than 'wants', and an unsatisfiable spiritual hunger is generated. As such, it is utterly self-referential. By contrast, an authentic experience of participating in the world process finds its congruent expressions in the public domain and notably in the spiritual praxis of liberation.

Probably, there is no public figure in today's global culture who would fit the description of a robotic being/homo oeconomicus in the service of Empire, better than Donald Trump – a Twitter 'celebrity', literally functioning in an alternative (virtual) reality, and being ultimately driven by the principles of power consolidation and the maximisation of the economic profit for the elite. Amongst the living political beings who seek to grapple with reality as it is, who are trustworthy in their personal witness and who strive to be accountable – in their words and actions – to those on the underside of history, one could mention, for example, Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist for female education, Thabo Makgoba, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town who continues the prophetic tradition of his predecessors (not least that of Archbishop Desmond Tutu), and perhaps also our own, prematurely departed Black Theologian Vuyani Vellem, to whom this article is dedicated. His life testimony was undoubtedly in tune with his theological work and church ministry, thus generating a harmony between the innermost experience and the exterior expression: a sort of equilibrium necessary for a life-giving spirituality – a spirituality of liberation and resistance – to emerge.

Idilikile intaba … Hamba kahle, Mfowethu!

Acknowledgements

9.In terms of its genealogy, fallism can be understood as 'the ideological nexus of black consciousness, radical black feminism and Pan-Africanism working in conjunction with a protest culture informed by radical civil disobedience' (Chikane 2018:2267 of 4730). The most frequently recurring demands of the students who started protesting across the country in 2015, with the #RhodesMustFall campaign followed by #FeesMustFall, included free, decolonised education for all, the immediate clearance of historical student debt and #EndOutsourcing of allied university workers. From the broader social perspective, fallism can be seen as a multifaceted movement, which has formed 'part of a larger struggle against the globalised system of racist capitalism' (Ndelu 2017:21).

10.See, inter alia, Kobo (2016, 2019), Vellem (2014a, 2015b, 2016, 2017), Tshaka (2010, 2014, 2015) and Maluleke (2010, 2015).

11.It should read zoon politikon, a Greek expression found in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (2002 [350 BC]) and meaning literally a 'political creature'.

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

J.U. contributed solely to this article.

Ethical consideration

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

Funding information

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

Data availability 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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