

# ***Ukuthwasa* in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa: A Consideration of Some Opportunities Presented by Christian Engagements with African Indigenous Religion**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The postcolonial era has brought a renewed appreciation of African Indigenous Religion and culture among some Southern African Christians. However, because of Southern Africa's colonial religious heritage, some African Christians are opposed to a constructive engagement with African religiosity and practice. Others seem to operate with a double consciousness—participating in African Indigenous religious ceremonies and holding African religious beliefs during the week while claiming to be Christians on Sunday. This article engages the Methodist Church of South Africa's consideration of *ukuthwasa* and the practice of being a Traditional Healer in light of some instances of 'double consciousness'. It argues that this engagement is a form of religious pluralism that requires intentional and critical consideration. After introducing the concept of *ukuthwasa* and recent discussions around being both a Christian minister and a Traditional Healer, some examples of African Christian double consciousness among some members of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa are examined. Based on this critical reflection, some possibilities that Christian engagements with African religion and culture might offer for the contextualisation and decolonisation of Southern African Christianity are presented.

## **Keywords**

Christianity; African Christianity; African Indigenous Religion; *ukuthwasa*; decolonisation; Methodism; South Africa.

## **Introduction**

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa's (MCSA) Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Commission (DEWCOM) recently released a discussion document

to guide its members in reflecting on whether it is possible to be both an African Traditional Healer (*Isangoma*) and an ordained member of the clergy of the Christian Church (Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Commission 2023). It has generated a great deal of discussion, and even some media attention (Obose 2022; Sithandiwe 2023) since, as we shall see, there is still no agreement on the ways in which African Christians should relate to African Indigenous Religions.

Peter Berger and Wolfram Weisse argue that, in largely religious contexts, such as southern Africa, (which is the context under consideration in this article), the study of religious pluralism is qualitatively as important as studies on secularity (see Berger and Weisse 2016, 1; Weisse 2019, 35–48; Berger 2014, ix–xi). South Africa remains a generally religious society where 92.3% of persons profess some form of faith, with an overwhelmingly Christian religious identity and affiliation (between 84.2% and 86%) (Schoeman 2017, 3). Some persons may question the sense in which South Africa can be described as religiously pluralistic since Christian religiosity is so numerically dominant in the region. As we shall see, there are subtle but important implicit religious beliefs and practices that challenge the monolithic view of contemporary Christianity in the Southern African context. These beliefs and practices can be related to contested worldviews (or religious beliefs) and practices.

As with all important theological and social topics, the challenge of pluralism holds both promise and peril for the Christian faith in Southern Africa. The promise is that an authentic and critical engagement with plurality of belief and practice could lead to innovation in both doctrine and practice for Southern African Christianity. The peril is that uncritical, or ill informed, responses to this reality could lead to blind denial on the one hand, or an uncritical collapse into a complex set of questions and beliefs that are themselves value-laden and not ideologically neutral. Some fear that such a collapse could weaken Christian links with historical orthodoxy and even lead to conflict with other Christian traditions and communities (Mhlope 2015, 1–2).

The history of South Africa's religious demography began long before the arrival of the Christian missionaries from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mndende 2019, 158). Stated simply, religion did not arrive on South African shores with the European missionaries. There is a wide consensus that the dominance of Christianity in contemporary South Africa, particularly colonially shaped Christianity, can be traced to the work of Western missionaries, and colonially ardent Christians who arrived in South Africa from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (De Gruchy 1997, 155–172; Elphick 2012, 13–102). When Christian missionaries arrived on the shores of Southern Africa,

they uncritically conflated Christian beliefs with their Western culture and the political tenets of colonialism. This meant that African Indigenous Religions were unjustly suppressed and denigrated by colonial, and later apartheid-era, religious sensibilities (Mndende 2019, 158). In recent decades, however, there has been a significant upsurge of interest in the decolonisation of Christianity in South Africa. In part, this forms part of the complex decolonialisation movement that Sabelo Ndlovu Gatsheni describes as moving from merely being colonial institutions “in Africa,” to becoming authentically African. He writes,

Schools, colleges, churches, and universities in Africa are sites for reproduction of coloniality. We so far do not have African universities [or churches]. We have universities [and churches] in Africa. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 489)

This impetus has been accompanied by a growing desire to understand the importance of pre-Christian Southern African Indigenous Religions. There are numerous calls for African Christian theology to engage in a critical and constructive dialogue with African Indigenous Religion and tradition if it is to move towards becoming an authentic, contextual expression of the Christian faith for Africans.

This article considers the case of some Southern African Methodists who hold Christian beliefs and practise Christian rituals while also adhering to some African Indigenous religious practices and beliefs (Obose 2022; “Ukuthwasa and the Practice of Being a Traditional Healer: A Conversation within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa” 2023). It is argued that this reality constitutes a dialectic tension between the two religious traditions that could be characterised as a form of double consciousness. Hence, this article will explore some of the opportunities and challenges that might emerge through an intentional engagement between some forms of Christianity and some forms of African Indigenous Religion in South Africa.

Before continuing, I should present a brief excursus on the usage of the terms South Africa and Southern Africa in this article. South Africa refers to a nation state on the Southern tip of Africa, the Republic of South Africa, whereas Southern Africa refers to a geographical region on the southern tip of Africa that covers multiple nation states. At times I shall refer to South Africa specifically—since some of the demographic and other relevant research is delimited within the nation’s boundaries. Since the case under consideration in this essay relates to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (a single Christian denomination that operates in six Southern African nations) (see section 2.6.1 of *The Methodist Book of Order: The Laws*

and *Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* 2016, 24), there will be instances where reference is made to the broader geographical region.

### On Religious Pluralism in South Africa?

As stated in the introduction, some persons may question whether South Africa (or Southern Africa) can be described as a functionally religiously plural context. In part, this is because of the very high instances of self-identified Christian religiosity in the region. Moreover, there is wide-scale and uncritical adoption of a Western Christian “worldview” in society at large, and even within nation states (Mndende 2019, 157–174; Platjies van Huffel 2019, 135–138; Forster 2021a, 177–179). The most recent survey of the South African population conducted by Statistics South Africa shows that 86% of South Africa’s citizens self-identified as Christian (Statistics South Africa 2017, 28). Kobus Schoeman’s data shows a slight variation (based on differing data sampling) at 84.2% (Schoeman 2017, 3).

Functionally, the religious dominance of Christianity has meant that a great deal of South African life has been uncritically shaped by tacit Christian beliefs, values, and practices. For example, many public government schools still conduct Christian prayers and Bible readings in their classes and assemblies (Platjies van Huffel 2019, 135–156; Davids 2019), and the South African government regards only Christian religious festivals as public holidays (for example, Easter and Christmas) (Forster 2021a, 185; 2021b, 10–11). Does that mean that South Africa is not religiously plural in practice? How one answers this question has to do with how one understands the concept of pluralism. In this article, I have opted for the understanding provided

**Table 1:** General Household Survey 2015: Religious Affiliation

| <b>Religion (names as stipulated in the survey)</b>                | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--|-------------------|
| Christian  | 86.0%             |
| Muslim   | 1.9%              |
| Ancestral, tribal, animist, or other traditional African religions | 5.4%              |
| Hindu  | 0.9%              |
| Jewish   | 0.2%              |
| Other religion   | 0.4%              |
| Nothing in particular  | 5.2%              |
| Refused or do not know   | 0.0%              |
| Total  | 100.0%            |

by the well-known religious sociologist Peter Berger. Berger contends that pluralism refers to the reality that there “are several ways of looking at reality” (Berger 2014, 1). In other words, a pluralist society is one in which there are multiple worldviews, or ways of making sense of the world. Such an understanding of pluralism is largely functional since it understands that any theory of plurality should be able to account for “the co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular discourses” (Berger 2014, ix). Such an understanding of pluralism will serve our analysis well. The case of pluralism that we are investigating in this instance is founded on the reality that there are various worldviews (Christian and African Indigenous) that coexist within the same religious tradition, namely, Southern African Methodism (Sithandiwe 2023). As such, we can conclude that, in this instance at least, it is credible to speak of a measure of functional pluralism, even if we are discussing members of the same theological tradition (Methodism), from the same dominant religious tradition (missionary / colonial originating Christianity), and in the same region (Southern Africa). I would also contend that, given this understanding of pluralism is used, we would have to account for the variety of religious worldviews and secular worldviews (other than the diversity of Christian worldviews) that are held by South Africans. In this article, however, we will focus on Southern African Christians who are members of a historically colonial / missionary Church who hold both Christian and African Indigenous religious beliefs and participate in both Christian and African Indigenous religious rituals.

### **Christianity and African Indigenous Religion among Some Southern African Methodists**

I first became aware of a form of religious pluralism that expressed itself as a dialectic tension regarding religious identity and practice that some Southern African Christians face when living, and serving as Methodist ministers in largely black South African communities in the 1990s and early 2000s. Dialectic tensions are understood as “contradictions or discursive struggles” that emerge as persons or communities experience “a system of oppositions that logically or functionally negate one another” (Baxter and Scharp 2015, 1). In this instance, a dialectic tension emerged as some black Southern African Christians sought to negotiate their Christian identity, beliefs, and practices in relation to their identities, African cultural practices, and African Indigenous religious beliefs.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa is the largest Christian grouping in South Africa and is also a largely black South African Christian denomination (Schoeman 2017, 1–7). Methodism first came to the southern

tip of Africa with a soldier of the British Army, John Irwin, who was stationed at the Cape Garrison in 1795 (Forster and Bentley 2008, 79). The first Methodist lay preacher, George Middlemis (a soldier in the 72<sup>nd</sup> regiment of the British Army) arrived in 1805 and soon set up a formal Methodist community, which was eventually taken over by a Sergeant Kendrik, also a Methodist lay preacher, in 1812. By that point, the congregation numbered 142 persons, of whom 128 were settlers and 14 were members of the indigenous population (Forster and Bentley 2008, 79–80). However, Methodist missionary work grew rapidly after the arrival of the 1820 settlers (Millard 2005, 135). By 1860, there were 132 Methodist missionaries and ministers in the Cape and Natal. What made the Methodist mission somewhat different from the work of other colonial era missionary endeavours was that the Methodists were not formally segregated along racial lines (Forster and Bentley 2008, 81, 13–24). Hence, they encouraged the emergence, and training, of indigenous religious leaders. While this led to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa becoming the largest predominantly black South African Christian denomination, it also sadly contributed to the spread of colonial Christianity in the region. In large part, this was because the missionaries and the indigenous leaders uncritically subsumed the moral, political, and cultural elements of colonialism into their Christian faith (Balía 1991, 3). This has contributed to some troubling tensions for black Southern African Methodists in the postcolonial era.

As a member of the clergy serving communities of Southern African Methodists, I soon became aware that my members were negotiating their faith along two “parallel tracks,” shaped by conflicting language, conflicted cultural expectations, and mediated religious practices that were shaped by the tension of colonially formed Christianity and the expectations of African Indigenous religiosity (Lebow 2003, 370). My members were sincere and deeply religious Christians. At the same time, they adhered to African traditional rituals and practices, and were formed by the beliefs of pre-Christian African religions. This phenomenon is quite common and has led to numerous research studies, most recently the *ukuthwasa* discussion document (Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Commission 2023). Donald Williams and Wessel Bentley (two South African Methodist academics) outline a number of instances of the parallel tracks of colonial Christianity and African Indigenous religiosity and culture in their research (Williams and Bentley 2020, 1–10). Among them are some empirical phenomena such as dress (wearing the religious vestments of 19<sup>th</sup>-century English clergy), liturgy (using translated versions of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662) in vernacular worship that still include prayers for the King of England) as well as less empirically visible elements such as appeals to “the ancestors”

and “spirits” and covert participation in African cultural and indigenous religious ceremonies (Williams and Bentley 2020, 1–10).<sup>1</sup> Another notable example comes from Jacob Mokhutso who studied Methodist burial practices in which members often participated in two separate sets of ceremonies (one in Westernised Christian settings and another in African religious settings) to ensure the appeasing of both their Christian beliefs and their African Indigenous religious beliefs (Mokhutso 2021, 1–12). There have also been studies of other rites of passage such as baptism (Forster 2006, 238–245) and marriage (Mbunyuza-Memani 2018, 26, 30–32) and of course the practices of African Indigenous healing mentioned earlier.

Simply stated, Southern African Methodists were raised on a diet of colonially infused Christianity that alienated indigenous Africans from African religion and culture and sadly vilified African Indigenous religion and culture. A respected early lay preacher who was seminal to the missionary establishment and growth of Southern African Methodism, Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu (better known as DDT Jabuvu), offers a clear example of this sad reality. After graduating from the University of London, Jabavu was appointed as professor at the South African Native College (Fort Hare, 1915–1944). He is remembered as a progressive and courageous champion for justice for black South Africans. Yet his religious views express an understanding of Christianity that was quite common among colonial Methodist missionaries of the time and deeply concerning for African Christians today (Elphick 2012, 125–127). The stated intention of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Southern African missionaries was to “Christianize all of African culture, and the African personality as well” (Elphick 2012, 65). Emele Mba Uka notes that missionary endeavours reached beyond the church into missionary schooling, which

spared no efforts in condemning everything African as worthless, pagan, primitive and poor. Consequently young educated Africans, through Western indoctrination not only lost interest in African beliefs but despised them as if they themselves were white men. In this way the vitality of the African Traditional Religion suffered a severe setback as the Africans themselves began to lose confidence in anything African. (Uka 1991, 332)

Of course, this meant the erosion of African identity, the erasure of African traditions, and the intentional demonisation of African indigenous religiosity. DDT Jabavu was subjected to such indoctrination since he writes that before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, Africa was “devoid of

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1. For a rich and detailed discussion of these phenomena, see Bentley and Williams 2020 and Williams 2019.

spiritual outlook, enslaved by tyrannical witchcraft,” and that the missionaries were regarded as “guides, philosophers and friends” (in Elphick 2012, 126). Sadly, such sentiments of African religion and culture have remained prominent among many ordinary Southern African Methodists, and other Christians in Africa today (Chidester et al. 1997, 196, 365, 401; Elphick 2012, 13–26, 65–81; Mhlope 2015; 2023). Nokuzula Mndende observes that when Christian missionaries came to Southern Africa, “[r]eligion, Christianity, and Western culture were incorrectly implied to be synonymous with one another” (Mndende 2019, 158). The challenges to African cosmologies, cultural and social ethics, gender and marriage relations, rites of passage, aspects of physical appearance (such as clothing), and language were devastating for African identity and social life (De Gruchy 1997, 155–172). A consequence was that “the new imposed religion brought by missionaries displaced the indigenous forms of spirituality and relegated them to exclusive and supposedly outdated cultural practices of the Black population of South Africa” (Mndende 2019, 158).

In the case of the communities I served, I witnessed numerous struggles among the members of my congregation, and also within individuals themselves. First, there was an ongoing tension between those members of the church who held to the missionary views (related to what was described above), i.e., that to be Christian one would need to reject certain, or all, African cultural and religious beliefs and practices. These persons were often openly critical of African traditional rites of passage associated with birth, the coming of age, marriage, and death. In the most extreme instances, such practices were characterised as dabbling in “witchcraft,” and persons who were accused of such activities faced grave social consequences, even to the point of persecution and harm (Chitakure 2017, 1–3; Wallace 2015, 23–51; Manala 2004, 1491–1511; Mhlope 2015). The *ukuthwasa* discussion document describes this process as follows:

The missionary mindset (with exceptions) has been characterised by cynicism and alienation of African cultural practices, while seeking to universalise Western Christian expressions and value systems. The underlying view is that, for one to be authentically Christian, they must relinquish their cultural identity, abandon their cultural practices and consequently setting the gospel and Christ against culture. (Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Commission 2023, 8)

Second, far more common was that the community, and persons in the community, displayed a form of “double consciousness” in their religious beliefs and practices. The notion of double consciousness



is a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward “twoness” putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their racialized oppression and disvaluation in a white-dominated society. (Pittman 2016)

The term derives from W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois 2005). In this instance, a form of cognitive dissonance was evident in individuals and within the community that gave expression to the conflicting beliefs of some Methodists in relation to the expectations of African culture and religiosity. As the *ukuthwasa* discussion document states, the “lack of a theological position and pastoral guidance has subjected ministers and lay people with an ancestral calling to a substantial amount of judgement, suspicion and exclusion” (Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Commission 2023, 8). To avoid judgement and exclusion, persons who practised African Indigenous beliefs and rituals, simply did so in secret.

I became aware that members of my congregation would undergo two religious ceremonies for births, marriages, and deaths. With weddings, for example, there would be a “white wedding” (where the word “white” referred both to the historical naming of the practice of being married by a clergyperson in a church and to the white wedding dress that the bride was expected to wear) and an African traditional wedding ceremony that took place near the ancestral home of the couple (Mbunyuza-Memani 2018, 26, 30–32). Something similar happened with funerals. There would be a funeral service at the church followed by a Christian burial at the local cemetery (Mokhutso 2021, 5–6). In addition to these services, however, there would be other ceremonies that would take place at the home of the deceased and requirements for members of the immediate family to undergo ritual cleansing after a certain period of time, as well as ceremonies to engage the ancestors (the living dead) on behalf of the deceased (Forster 2006, 233; Mokhutso 2021, 5–6). Another instance of this double consciousness related to health and healing (cf. Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Commission, 2023, 14–17). I recall that a member of our seminary student community was unwell at a certain point. We had arranged a special service to pray for her in our regular Tuesday morning chapel service. But that same evening I noticed that another service was taking place. When I asked another congregational member about it, he informed me that it was an African traditional ceremony involving candles and water (Morekwa 2004, 15–16, 78–79). Since the health condition was serious, the members of the community wanted to ensure that both the Christian and the African Indigenous religious sentiments were appeased. I remember how sad I felt that we were

unable to bring these “conflicting” requirements and expectations together in a meaningful and appropriate manner in a combined prayer service.

Of course, there were times when I was invited to be present at some indigenous religious and cultural ceremonies. But I was an observer at these ceremonies, however, rather than an active participant like those who presided over the religious ceremony. At other times, I was told by members of the congregation that they needed to travel “home” (i.e., to their ancestral home), to take part in an African cultural or African Indigenous religious ceremony. Again, I was left with a sense of sadness that colonial ideas about Africa and Africans had been internalised by some African Christians, and that such ideas had become so entrenched in many Southern African Methodist churches that people felt they needed to separate their Christian beliefs from their cultural, historical, and traditional beliefs and practices.

In light of these experiences, I ask: To what extent might interreligious and intercultural engagement within Southern African Methodist communities and among Methodists in Southern Africa who hold differing views on the importance of African Indigenous religion contribute to the indigenisation and decolonisation of African Christianity? Moreover, what might some of the opportunities and limits of such engagements be?

### **Opportunities and Limits of Interreligious and Intercultural Engagements between Southern African Methodism and African Indigenous Religiosity**

As already stated, in its various forms Christianity is the numerically dominant religion in South Africa according to the 2015 General Household Survey (Schoeman 2017, 3). Approximately 84.2% to 86% of South Africans indicated that they are affiliated with some form of Christianity. The next largest group, comprising 5.4% of the population, belong (as a primary or singular choice) to a broad range of African Indigenous Religions (Schoeman 2017, 3; “General Household Survey Statistics South Africa 2017, 28). As we saw in the previous section, however, it would not be unreasonable to argue that there are many more people who hold both Christian and African Indigenous religious beliefs simultaneously and practice aspects of each tradition at separate times and locations (see Mokhutso 2021, 6–7). If the General Household Survey were to inquire about *both* Christian *and* African Indigenous religious beliefs, I would venture that the percentage of the population who held such ‘tandem’ beliefs would be much higher than 5.4%.

Yet, as Nokuzula Mndende argues, we face a kind of double consciousness that is not openly dealt with.

On Sundays these persons had to make sure that they go to church in order to declare their public adherence to the Christian faith. This resulted in split social and religious identity, where one had to pretend to be something she or he is not during the day, (because of socio-political and religious circumstances), yet at night or in secret she or he lived a normal life and communicated with her or his ancestors. (Mndende 2019, 159)

In response to this reality, Tinyiko Maluleke, one of South Africa's notable contemporary theologians, argues that, "postcolonial theology cannot proceed without taking seriously the continued and historic influence of African religions and traditions as past and present hosts of Christianity in Africa" (Maluleke 2021, 313). Moreover, this is not only a theological enterprise. It also relates to culture since, as Andreotti suggests, any attempt at Africanising and decolonising knowledge in Africa will have to take into "consideration how indigenous people lost their freedom to exist as indigenous people in almost every single sphere of existence" (Andreotti et al. 2015, 24). Hence, this is a project of both truth-seeking and justice-seeking among African religious persons.

It is in this regard that Peter Berger and Wolfram Weisse have advocated for a much more rigorous, and indeed critical, consideration of engagement with both formal and informal religious pluralism in religiously pluralistic contexts. After all, such engagement takes place in formal settings, such as "inter-religious dialogue in seminars" as well as "around kitchen tables where people tell each other 'what we believe'" (Berger and Weisse 2016, 1). They rightly note that there are some moral challenges associated with these kinds of engagements. Sometimes, these engagements resemble "boundary negotiations between non-existent countries" (Berger and Weisse 2016, 1). Consider for a moment who the "we" is that represents a faith tradition or set of practices. In the earlier example, the "we" of Southern African Methodism was clearly not a single monolithic or doctrinally cohesive group. There are those who believe that African indigenous religiosity and culture are out of step with the kind of Christian beliefs they inherited from their missionary ancestors, and there are those who believe that, to have historical and contextual integrity, their faith needs to embrace and rediscover the richness of African indigenous religiosity and culture. What is the right approach here? Who is right, and who is wrong? Or does the answer lie somewhere between? Such engagements are laden with promise and peril! How we regard each other and each other's beliefs and practices have significant consequences for the doctrinal and moral character of our own faith as well as for the treatment and safety of the "supposed" other. But there are some ways of thinking that may help us in this process.

### From a Ptolemaic to a Copernican View of Interreligious Pluralism

Berger and Weisse draw on a beautiful metaphor from John Hick's book, *God has Many Names*, to advocate for a more morally responsible understanding of interreligious encounter (see Hick 1980). Hick argues that many believers (including himself in his early life) have a sort of "Ptolemaic" view of their religion, where their religion is the "earth" around which other religions "orbit" (akin to how Ptolemy thought that the planets of our solar system revolved around the earth) (Hick 1980, 51–52). For many people, their religion, their beliefs, and their practices are the centre of their world, the "firm ground" on which they stand. All other beliefs and practices are thought to orbit around what is thought to constitute their centre. For a more moral, and indeed responsible, engagement with our diversity of beliefs and practices, however, Hick argues that we should move towards a "Copernican" view of religious plurality, where "the universe of faiths centres upon God" (Hick 1980, 52–53). This is likened to how Copernicus came to understand that the planets of our solar system (including the earth, which is our place of existence), revolve around the sun (Hick 1980, 52–53). We are not at the centre—God is. Rather, like other traditions and beliefs, we are turned towards our centre (towards God or, in Copernican imagery, towards the sun). Our intention is thus to discover the truth, rather than to defend our position in the universe. Numerous contemporary scholars in the Christian tradition (Maluleke 2021, 313; Mokhutso 2021, 6–8; Bentley and Williams 2020, 9–12) and African Indigenous Religion (Mndende 2019, 157–179; Uka 1991, 330–332) have issued strong calls for respectful and courageous engagement that seeks greater truth and authenticity for African religiosity.

As Maluleke, Bentley and Williams, Mokhutso, and Forster have argued, this is an important task for contemporary African Christianity to undertake, since it seeks to free African Christianity from the deforming intentions of colonialism while deliberately seeking to Africanise both belief and practice among African Christians. In this regard, there are three possibilities for such an approach to African Christian pluralism, and at least one caution to consider.

First, such an approach seeks to *deal with the perverse logic of colonially infused Christianity*. Walter D. Mignolo argues that one of the primary consequences of colonialism was that it injured the social and psychological existence of Africans through its "perverse logic" of Western supremacy in culture, religion, and identity (Mignolo 2007, 450). In this case, the work of the Algerian philosopher, psychiatrist, and political activist, Frantz Fanon, and the contribution of the South African philosopher and psychologist

Phumla Gobodo-Madikizela are a great help. Fanon argued for a form of liberation for Africans that was not only freedom from colonial rule, but the dismantling of the psychological and social harm enacted by the pathologies of the colonizers (Fanon 2008, 35). Gobodo-Madikizela argues that (South) Africans need a deliberate engagement with the structures and beliefs of dehumanisation that colonialism and apartheid enacted upon them if the project of “rehumanisation” is to take place (Gobodo-Madikizela 2002, 7–32, 2016, 43–61). A Copernican approach to African Christian religious pluralism holds the promise of the discovery of a contextually relevant, historically continuous, and meaningful form of Christianity to emerge that is not based on the foundations of negrophobia, racism, and chauvinism (Mbembe 2016, 34).

Second, a Copernican approach to African Christian pluralism is capable of *dealing with the “soft power” of colonial language, liturgy, and epistemology*. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that the intention of the colonial political apparatus was not only to divide and dehumanise the people they colonised by using “hard power” (such as political power, the military, and police). They also employed what he calls “soft power” to divide persons and dominate them (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1992, 5; Vorster 2021, 50). This was most often done by denigrating traditional cultures, destroying and devaluing indigenous languages and art forms, and deconstructing traditional education so that persons felt alienated from their ancestors, their geography, and even themselves (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1992, 5). When the African self is told that she is less beautiful, less intelligent, less capable, less important than the Euro-American normative representation, one consequence is cultural separation and negation—as we argued earlier, this is akin to W.E.B. Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness” (Du Bois 2005; Pittman 2016). To end the violence of linguistic, cultural, religious, and educational colonisation, we will need to decentre the “Ptolemaic” supposition that Western and missionary Christianity is normative for Africans and Africa. This will require that the traditions, cultures, religious practices, realities, and experiences of Africans are once again carefully considered and engaged by “Copernican” pluralist Christians. We will have to humble ourselves to listen and learn. In addition to this, we must also evaluate the epistemologies of belief (theological and social knowledge) that are considered to be normative in both African and Western religious studies and theological academic settings. As I reflect on the churches and religious communities that I have served in my ministry, as well as students that I teach, many of whom are training to be clergy, I recognise that it does them a disservice to allow the hegemony of tacit forms of Western supremacy, Afro-pessimism, and white supremacy to dominate their theological and religious lives and their learning. Vuyani

Vellem, an important African Christian theologian, rightly said of African Christianity that “the West is not our creator,” and, given that, African Christians need to engage in a deliberate attempt of “un-thinking the West” (Vellem 2017, 2, 8). Thus, Southern African Methodists will need to engage in a process of understanding both what has shaped us (and thus what we must unlearn), but also where we are and what was here before the missionaries arrived (so that we may learn more about ourselves, and learn to pray in our own languages, idioms, and worship with indigenous art forms) (Mahokoto 2020, 27–44).

Third, a “Copernican” approach to African Christian pluralism holds some promise for *allowing the emergence of authentically African Christian beliefs and practices*. John Mbiti rightly notes in his book, *Concepts of God in Africa*, that “African peoples are not religiously illiterate” (Mbiti 1970, xiii). Long before the arrival of colonial missionaries on our shores, African persons and communities held religious beliefs and made sense of our lives and the world. As Maluleke argues, we must look at the “influence of African religions and traditions as past and present hosts of Christianity in Africa” (Maluleke 2021, 313). A common critique of such intentions is that they will lead to syncretism (Mndende 2019, 169). Of course, as Mndende argues, we should be careful that we do not dilute and subjugate African Indigenous religious beliefs and practices under the dominant power of Christian expansion or evangelism (Mndende 2019, 169–170). Nor should we be naïve about the reality that Christianity has some traditional and historical boundaries related to doctrinal orthodoxy (Hick 1980, 64–65). What is necessary, in a pluralist context, is to maintain a constructive dialectic tension that can contribute to contextually appropriate African Christian doctrines and beliefs without negating African Indigenous religious beliefs. Note that I preface the dialectic tension, in this instance, in a positive manner, i.e., it is constructive rather than destructive. It requires both a rootedness within a tradition while seeking to authentically embrace its identity, location, and history in Africa and among Africans. As Desmond Tutu once remarked, “I am ecumenical, because I am a good Anglican” (in Van der Westhuizen 2022, 153). As shown earlier, Southern African Methodists are already engaging both their Christian and their African religious identities. It should be our task to find ways of bringing these into a rich and creative dialogue with one another, rather than relegating them to conflict and secrecy.

Finally, as Berger and Weisse argue, this leads us to an important caution. They note that there is a “possibility that Hick leaves out,” i.e., that there are some aspects of this engagement to which we will need to “say no” (Berger and Weisse 2016, 2). The reality is that not everything can be true or good. Hence, when it comes to working towards an authentic African Christian

religious pluralism, not every belief, practice, or action can be adopted uncritically as true or good, and the same holds of course for Christian beliefs and practices. What is helpful in their framing of the “no” is that they argue that there should be no “a-priori *doctrinal* limits to open-ended dialogue. But there are *moral* limits” (Berger and Weisse 2016, 2). For example, one cannot claim to be Christian and accept any practice or belief that denigrates persons or beliefs and practices that could cause deliberate physical or emotional harm. There must be some clear moral limits to what one can accept as either true or good in both a doctrinal and a religious sense. However, rather than weakening the possibilities of African Christian pluralism, this notion strengthens the commitment to searching for deeper doctrinal truth and higher moral standards that can serve African Christians and African Christianity. As stated above, if we adopt a Copernican approach—facing towards God who is the centre of all that exists, and the author of all truth—we may just find that we (as Christians) also need to dispense with some beliefs and practices that denigrate and erode a sincere and authentic African Christianity.

### Conclusion

This article sought to highlight the importance of maintaining a healthy regard for religious pluralism as an approach to interreligious encounter in South Africa. First, it argued that pluralism, rather than secularism, is a primary concern in Southern African society. Second, it was suggested that even though many South Africans are Christian, there is a form of religious pluralism and religious diversity at work in South Africa, and this is particularly so among South African Christians. This form of pluralism is characterised by the understanding that there are various worldviews (Christian and African Indigenous) that coexist within the same religious tradition, Southern African Methodism. The *ukuthwasa* conversation document issued by the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Commission highlights the importance and urgency of this reality for Southern African Methodists. In the next section, the dialectic tension between Christian beliefs and practices and African Indigenous beliefs and practices among some South African Methodists were discussed. These were framed in relation to a history of colonial Christian mission that overtly, and at times inadvertently, enacted religious, cultural, and linguistic violence upon Southern Africans. The final section of the article argued for an approach to African Christian pluralism that could lead to a more contextually appropriate, culturally attuned, set of African Christian beliefs and practices that could serve Methodism and Methodists in Southern Africa.

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