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Has Methodism's 'White History' Determined Its 'Black Future'? African Traditional Healing and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

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Abstract: Postcolonial discourses on religion have extensively explored the intersections of race and religion. Particular research within such discourses has been conducted to explore the intersection of Whiteness and Christianity in postcolonial contexts. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is an example of a postcolonial Christian denomination that seeks to assert itself as 'authentically African' whilst having a distinctly colonial, missionary history in Southern Africa. This article explores the enduring intersections of Whiteness and Christianity in the MCSA through analyzing the methodology and theoretical framework of a discussion document produced by the MCSA to explore the relationship between Methodism, *ukuthwasa*, and African Indigenous Religion. I contend that the MCSA structurally and epistemically, albeit unintentionally, reproduces Whiteness through privileging seemingly universal Methodist methods, theories, and concepts for producing theological knowledge that are colonially produced and continue to underscore the infrastructure of MCSA ecclesiology. The stubborn persistence of colonially inherited epistemologies is particularly evident when we see how a potentially groundbreaking document on *ukuthwasa* (calling) is subjected to the constraints of the very epistemic traditions it is intended to dislodge. Furthermore, I argue that, through the persistence of this epistemology, the MCSA moves to domesticate and civilize the African Indigenous in Southern Africa.

Keywords: religion and race; whiteness; lived religion; Methodism; African traditional healing; Christianity; postcolonial theory

Academic Editor: Kenneth L. Waters

Received: 6 December 2024
Revised: 1 April 2025
Accepted: 14 April 2025
Published: 16 April 2025

Citation: Elliott, David. 2025. Has Methodism's 'White History' Determined Its 'Black Future'? African Traditional Healing and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *Religions* 16: 513. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040513

1. Introduction

Simangaliso Kumalo (2009, p. vi), a notable African Methodist theologian and scholar of religion, argues that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) contemporaneously "...moves from its colonial white beginnings through to an indigenous black future" in its identity, thought, and practice. This claim about Methodism in Southern Africa, with its history of entanglement with colonialism and Apartheid as both participant and resistor, invites various questions. One such question is the following: what is the relationship among Methodism, Whiteness, and indigenous culture and religion in contemporary Southern Africa?

In this paper, I explore this question by teasing out the epistemology informing the methodology and theoretical framework of a discussion document produced to stimulate dialogue within the MCSA about indigenous culture, Methodism, and the black future of the church. This document is titled "*Ukuthwasa* and the Practice of Being a Traditional Healer: a Conversation within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa".[1] Using critical

discourse analysis, I offer an analysis of the MCSA through the exploration of tensions between its self-assertions as an 'authentically African' Christian denomination and its white colonial origins, which appear to remain evident within its epistemology, ecclesiology, language, praxis, and policies. From this analysis, I move to offer some theoretical engagements relevant to postcolonial Christianity in Southern Africa to demonstrate and argue that, in its engagement with *ukuthwasa*, the contemporary MCSA is complicit in the reproduction and preservation of colonial norms and Whiteness as privileged.

2. The Intersection of Race and Religion in Postcolonial Contexts

To thoroughly explore the potentially enduring entanglements of colonialism, Whiteness, and Christianity in the MCSA, it is worth mapping key discourses on the intersection of race and religion in postcolonial contexts. Postcolonial discourses on religion begin from the notion that religion, as a category and term, plays a critical role in the development of race as a category, term, and political mechanism (Chidester 1996; Masuzawa 2005; Nye 2019; Fitzgerald 2000). David Chidester (1996, 2014, 2018) highlights this in the South African context by discussing the emergence of comparative religion amid, and in the wake of, colonial encounters. Chidester (2014, p. 5) suggests that the identity of colonizer and colonized are mutually shaped, as are knowledge and processes of knowledge production, creating precursors to racial categories. These precursors were designed in discernible forms. The colonizer, and, subsequently, the West and Europe, was constructed as progressive and 'modern' due to having religion (which is interchangeable with Christianity), whereas the colonized were backward, prehistoric, and 'savage', totally lacking religion (Chidester 1996, p. 15).

Through the creation of human history centered on European Christendom, a universal and homogeneous reality grounded in that which is Western (and white) was made possible (Masuzawa 2005, p. 12). Postcolonial scholars of religion thus view Christianity as providing an opportunity to construct a genealogy of constructions of 'the human' (Chidester 1996, 2018) and investigate the power dynamics in processes of constructing history and narratives about history (Asad 1993, p. 4). This is of relevance for studying enduring colonial legacies of race in postcolonial contexts. Colonial conceptualizations of Christian humans and non-Christian non-humans, paired with the correlates of being a 'heathen' such as "lazy savage" (Chidester 1996, p. 15), and Biblical notions of animals having no rights being extended to 'heathens' (Chidester 1996, pp. 14–15), are intimately entangled and intersected with the development of racial categorization. Considering this, Christianity is an access point for studying how racialized knowledge about human beings is produced, mediated, controlled, and presented as normative throughout human history. Christianity can be studied as a 'sedimentation' of historic phenomena, such as race, to determine how these phenomena continue in new or enduring forms in postcolonial contexts (Bergunder 2014, pp. 269–70).

Often discussed in discourses on coloniality, Christianity, and race is the notion of Whiteness. Whiteness can be defined as a 'transcendental norm' (Yancy 2015, p. vix) that 'hides itself' within what is typically considered 'normal' (Yancy 2012, p. 7). Through being hidden in taken-for-granted norms, Whiteness is established in many contexts as the hermeneutics through which reality is 'read' and thus is strategically positioned as central-yet-peripheral. Jessica Wai-Fong Wong (2016, p. 952) argues that Christian theological knowledge is of particular importance when investigating coloniality and Whiteness, due to the history of Whiteness being grounded in European white Christianity and transmission of a colonial "white European Jesus". Michel Andraos (2012, p. 7) agrees with Wai-Fong Wong and, in the context of discussing theological education, contends that often Christian theological education still prefers that which is colonial, Western, and

white, creating and transmitting knowledge that privileges Whiteness. Steve Biko (1987, p. 31) sharply describes Christianity in Africa as the "white man's religion", arguing that Christianity played a key role in the violence and epistemicide, the comprehensive and systematic destruction of epistemologies, experienced by indigenous black Africans during colonization. These arguments highlight the embedded white colonial logics, norms, and political machinations within historically colonial Christian traditions. These enduring legacies need to be overtly excised from Christian traditions. If not, these phenomena continue to exist untroubled and 'invisible' within religious traditional epistemologies, systems, and structures, preserving and continuing to privilege that which is proximal to Whiteness informed by colonial norms.

The MCSA is exemplary of colonial Christianity's civilizing mission in Southern Africa. As noted by Rev. William Shaw (1861, p. 138)[2], the work of Methodism in Southern Africa was critical to "humanizing and civilizing" Indigenous peoples, raising their "moral condition" as people embroiled in "unmitigated heathenism". He further argues the necessity of bringing the "predatory habits" and "moral state" of Indigenous groups "under [the Gospel's] mild and ameliorating control" that they might be civilized and Christianized (William Shaw 1861, pp. 153–54). The civilizing and Christianizing impetus of colonial Methodism is deeply entangled with racialized conceptions of becoming 'truly human', moving from savage to civil (Chidester 1996, p. 15). As stated by the colonial Methodist Reverend Thornley Smith:

> "'In all the successful efforts of Missionaries among savages', as Archbishop Whately observes, 'civilization and conversion have gone hand in hand'. The Archbishop, however, seems to intimate that civilization must precede conversion; for he says 'All experience shows that a savage (though he may be trained to adore a crucifix or an image of the Virgin) cannot be a Christian'. The expressions are ambiguous. If the meaning is, *that a man cannot be a savage when he becomes a Christian, the sentiment is admitted, and is in fact but a mere truism*: but if it be meant that a savage must be civilized before he is converted, the position is denied; for *some of the fiercest and most barbarous of mankind*, both in Africa and the South-Sea Isles, have been *thoroughly subdued by the preaching of the Gospel*, ere they had advanced a step above their destitute condition. Let Christianity have its full share of merit. Let it be considered not as a secondary, *but as the primary instrument of the regeneration of our species*" (Smith 1849, p. 63, emphasis mine).

Methodism in Southern Africa is thus historically entangled in processes of civilizing African Indigenous groups, 'granting' them greater humanity through proximity to white colonial norms and values (Nye 2019, pp. 11–12). Considering this, any postcolonial study of the MCSA is likely to be drawn into two general directions. One direction is exploring the potentially enduring intersections of race and religion, beginning with white colonial Christianity and exploring how the norms, values, and/or epistemologies therein remain entangled with and embedded in contemporary MCSA thought, practices, and/or ecclesiology. Another direction is studies providing opportunities to better understand MCSA efforts to reimagine and reconstruct colonially inherited traditions and practices with a view to become a more authentically African church. Both are complex tasks that require careful engagement, and I primarily locate this article in the former, with brief suggestions for the latter.

3. *Ukuthwasa* and the Practice of Being a Traditional Healer: A Conversation Within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Today, more than 200 years after the earliest Methodist engagements with African Indigenous cultures and religions (Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society 1818, pp. 27–28),

and nearly 100 years since Methodism was established as an African institution independent of the British Methodist Church (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, p. 23), the MCSA is seeking to constructively engage with how to relate to or view Indigenous traditional healers. The document produced by the MCSA, titled '*Ukuthwasa* and the Practice of Being a Traditional Healer: A Conversation within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa' (henceforth referred to as 'the discussion document'), emerges from discussions regarding African Traditional Religions (ATR) and African Indigenous cultures. As noted above, the then British Wesleyan Methodist Church sought to civilize Indigenous groups through Christianizing without consideration of Indigenous knowledges, religions, cultures, and practices. The contemporaneous MCSA is potentially complicit in colonial legacies[3] of epistemicide (Kumalo 2020, p. xv) and other forms of colonial violence (Williams and Bentley 2020). Simultaneously, church historians have argued that discourses and practices of resistance against colonialism and coloniality have existed within Methodism since its arrival and establishment in Southern Africa. Some of these forms of resistance include celebrations and incorporations of African Indigenous culture and religion with traditional Methodism (Williams and Bentley 2020; Kumalo 2020). The discussion document ostensibly emerges in a context of historic and continuing ambivalence: contested history, paradox, and complexity regarding the relationship between Methodism and African Indigenous culture and religion in Southern Africa.

The discussion document was specifically produced as an attempt by the MCSA to establish formal discussion about Methodism's relationship with ATR and African Indigenous phenomena in contemporary Southern Africa. The following is stated within the document:

> "The goal of the discussion is to allow Methodist people to share their stories, experiences and insights on the subject for the church to: *(i) clarify its theological position on* ukuthwasa, *ancestors and traditional healing practice, (ii) develop pastoral responses for members, families and congregations who are trying to support and journey with people with an ancestral calling*…". (DEWCOM 2023, p. 3, emphasis mine)

The Methodist Conference[4] of 2022 mandated the Doctrine, Ethics, and Worship Committee (DEWCOM) of the MCSA to produce this discussion document to guide discussions on *ukuthwasa*, African Traditional Religion, and African Indigenous culture with a view to eventually form doctrinal positions and polity thereon (DEWCOM 2023, p. 3). The orientation of the discussion document is stated to be 'open dialogue', to produce dialogue among diverse people who maintain diverse positions on the subject matter (DEWCOM 2023, p. 3). The discussion document reflects how the MCSA, as an institution, and Methodism, as a religious tradition, approach Indigenous knowledges, practices, cultures, and religions in Southern Africa. Though it is notable that Christian denominations no longer hold as much authority over the lives of their constituents, they ultimately continue to shape how members of their denomination perceive reality and live out day-to-day religious beliefs and encounters with other people (Ammerman 2003). The discussion document thus contributes to ways in which contemporary Southern African Methodists approach and imagine the African Indigenous.

The discussion document reflects the MCSA's contemporaneous attempts to self-assert as a postcolonial African Christian denomination. The MCSA frames itself as an African church with the vision of "A Christ Healed Africa for the Healing of Nations" (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2022, p. 2). The MCSA also perceives that there is a need to "deepen [their] understanding of African and other spiritualities" and to "train ministers for the African context" (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, pp. 3–4) to make its vision manifest. Explicit references can be found in the MCSA's polity to the desire to deepen their understanding and embodiment of 'African thought' or 'African Christianity'

(Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2017, p. 271). Moves toward self-assertion as 'authentically African' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018, p. 68) within the MCSA occur in a context of internally perceived decline and identity crisis (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2024, pp. 10–13), as well as criticism from church historians and scholars that the MCSA is not currently authentically African (Khuzwayo 2020; Black Methodist Consultation 2020; Mokhutso 2024).

Moves toward being an authentically African Christian denomination within the MCSA regularly invoke the tradition of Methodism and Wesleyan heritage[5] as authenticating and adjudicating resources. Methodism and Wesleyan heritage are used overtly as tools for guiding identity and moving the MCSA toward reconciliation, transformation, and unity "across race, gender, class, sexual identities, or age" which are described as 'dividing lines' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2022, p. 12). It is notable that efforts for ecclesial and theological transformation in the MCSA have been met, in recent years, by institutional calls to return to Methodist and Wesleyan heritage—a kind of 'back to basics' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2023, pp. 13–15). While this could be understood as a call for a return to tradition, the then Presiding Bishop of the MCSA Nomthandazo Purity Malinga suggested that 'back to basics' denotes a call for re-imagining church tradition in a spirit of renewal that is responsive to, and engaged in, local cultural contexts (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2023, pp. 13–15). In this move toward reimagined engagements with Methodist and Wesleyan heritage, some reference is made to the MCSA's colonial history. There are statements of intent toward imagining new ways of being, believing, thinking, and doing Methodism in the Southern African context that are not shaped by colonial inheritance (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018, p. 10; 2021, p. 13).

An analysis of the MCSA discussion document on *ukuthwasa* provides an opportunity to examine the extent to which inherited Methodist methods and theories shape its contemporary engagement with local African rituals and logics, and to what extent it affords the MCSA pathways to being authentically African. Furthermore, such an analysis provides the opportunity to evaluate how effectively Methodist and Wesleyan intellectual and epistemic traditions can be, and are possibly being, reimagined in the discussion document for postcolonial Southern Africa.

4. The Epistemic Horizon of the MCSA's Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The methodology and theoretical framework used in the discussion document are promising sites for exploring potentially enduring effects of colonial Methodism's approaches to conceptualizing and engaging with the African Indigenous on contemporary MCSA approaches thereto. Through the methodology and theoretical framing of the discussion document, the MCSA's institutional and denominational theory of knowledge becomes evident. This epistemology includes how knowledge should be created and what knowledge is considered true and/or valid within the MCSA. Notably, the discussion document emphasizes that knowledge is produced through discussions led by the document with a view to directly shape doctrine, polity, and praxis within the MCSA (DEWCOM 2023, p. 3). Furthermore, through its choice of method and theory, the discussion document relies on the established epistemic horizon of the MCSA, while simultaneously offering a possibility for transgressing the traditional epistemic horizon of the MCSA. Epistemic horizon here refers to the epistemic limitations of what counts as knowledge within the MCSA. The established epistemic horizon of the MCSA relies on colonially inherited and contemporarily distributed methods, tools, and approaches for verifying and producing religious and theological knowledge within Methodism.

In the discussion document, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral method and the Order of Salvation are presented as sources of authority within the tradition (DEWCOM 2023, p. 9). Thus, 'Horizon' is useful to deploy in this instance, as it suggests that methods and theories of the MCSA delineate what counts as religious and theological knowledge and what can potentially be discovered or known about theology or theological practice by engaging Indigenous concepts such as *ukuthwasa*. Simultaneously, the discussion document also serves as an invitation to see 'what lies beyond', to make visible what may have been obscured, to trouble what appears normatively 'in view', and to discover or reimagine what is 'out of sight but may be discovered/known should we travel further' in dialogue with the African Indigenous.

The methodology for producing theological knowledge suggested by the discussion document is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (DEWCOM 2023, p. 13). The Quadrilateral has become a normative academic and lay methodological tool for producing theological knowledge within global Methodism (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2022, p. 1). Simultaneously, its broad usage has not come without criticism, and its validity as an epistemic tool has been contested (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2022, p. 2). In the MCSA, the Quadrilateral is recognized and utilized extensively as a universal theological tool. As suggested by the discussion document, "At the most basic level, the quadrilateral helps us to understand *any subject or form of Christian knowledge* within its biblical context, historical and contemporary knowledge sources, and people's lived experiences" (DEWCOM 2023, p. 10, emphasis mine). While the goal of conversation is not "to give people right answers" (DEWCOM 2023, p. 10), the discussion document utilizes the Quadrilateral with a view to produce universal MCSA knowledge, doctrine, policy, and praxis (DEWCOM 2023, pp. 3, 9).

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, coined and developed by Albert Outler (1985) who derived it from the work of John Wesley, utilizes four sources of knowledge for knowledge production: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (DEWCOM 2023, p. 9). Each of the 'legs' of the Quadrilateral are outlined briefly in the discussion document (DEWCOM 2023, p. 10). Notably, Scripture is given a position of primacy. This relies on Wesleyan theology, as Wesley sought to base every theological claim within the 'clear witness' of Scripture (see Wesley 1948, pp. vi–vii). The discussion document deploys the phrase 'word of God' in relation to Scripture as derived from Karl Barth, referring to its written, preached, and 'revealed' form (DEWCOM 2023, p. 10). Some references are made to interpretive traditions that inform how Christian texts are read (DEWCOM 2023, p. 17), but no outline is given as to which interpretive traditions do or do not guide the conversations to be held by the broader membership of the MCSA. Similarly notable is that, in discussing the other three 'legs' of the Quadrilateral, the discussion document offers fairly flexible definitions to be more inclusive of African Indigenous knowledges, traditions, practices, and experiences (DEWCOM 2023, p. 10). This expansion of definitions moves the quadrilateral outside of its initial framing, which relied more solely on Christian experiences, traditions, and reason (see Albert Outler 1985, pp. 8–10; Wesley 1948, pp. vi–vii) without explicit concern for how culture, ideology, and bias inform them.

The discussion document's theoretical framework is theological in nature. Following a brief preamble discussing the nature of theology as contextual, in which accepted doctrines are described as "'measuring rods' for policy and practice", the discussion document states the following:

> "The MCSA believes in the accepted credal positions of the universal Christian church as they are expressed in the ethos of the Methodist and Wesleyan theological heritage. Among other things, Methodist theology and practice is informed by our emphasis on the Order of Salvation, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the Methodist Rule of Life and the two sacraments Methodist people observe.

> *Ukuthwasa* is both a religious and a cultural phenomenon. To understand the phenomenon, thus requires engagement with Methodist theology and African cultural perspectives". (DEWCOM 2023, p. 9)

Thus, the theoretical framing of this document aligns with a view that the discourse to be had on *ukuthwasa* should primarily depart from 'universal' orthodox Christian credal positions, Methodist doctrine, and Methodist traditions. One notable Methodist theoretical tool offered by the discussion document is John Wesley's Order of Salvation (DEWCOM 2023, p. 13). Further detailing of this Order can be found in John Wesley's *44 Sermons*. John Wesley's *44 Sermons* is a text that is used by the MCSA for adjudicating and authenticating legitimate theological and religious knowledge (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, pp. 11–13). Wesley details the components of his Order of Salvation within this collection of sermons, beginning, in the preamble of the text, with his view that these sermons detail what he conceptualizes as 'true religion' (Wesley 1948, p. v).

Wesley (1948, p. vi) constructs his interpretation of 'true religion' within the context of delineating the 'way to Heaven', contemporarily called the Order of Salvation or process by which one can achieve salvation. Wesley derives his Order primarily from the Christian Bible, seeking to "distinguish this way of God from all those which are the invention of men" (Wesley 1948, p. vi). Scholars in fields exploring the entanglements of race and religion in postcolonial contexts have explored the ways in which certain Enlightenment-era conceptions of Christian salvation obscure harmful conceptions of 'the human' that are entangled with logics of race and racism (Nye 2019; Settler 2021). Engaging Wesley's *44 Sermons* as a text in which he details his Order of Salvation provides an opportunity to explore potentially embedded racialized Enlightenment, and subsequently colonial, norms and logics surrounding humanity and the human experience embedded within his conceptualization of salvation. Furthermore, as an adjudicating and authenticating document for the knowledge of the contemporary MCSA, it provides an opportunity to tease out the potential of these logics enduring in contemporary Methodist engagements with the African Indigenous.

A critical concept on which Wesley relies within the Order of Salvation is that people are inherently sinful, and that without conversion to Christianity, they are corrupt in their "inmost nature" (Wesley 1948, p. 79). He further states the following regarding this corruption:

> "The eyes of thine understanding are darkened, so that they cannot discern God, or the things of God. *The clouds of ignorance and error rest upon thee, and cover thee with the shadow of death*". (Wesley 1948, p. 79, emphasis mine)

This ignorance, he states, emanates from the fundamental corruption of original sin (Wesley 1948, p. 79). Original sin, for Wesley, results in what may be called an 'epistemological despair', meaning that true knowledge, or a true theory of knowledge, is impossible without Christian salvation. This is highlighted by the following quote:

> "Thou knowest nothing yet as thou oughtest to know, neither God, nor the world, nor thyself. Thy will is no longer the will of God, but is utterly perverse and distorted, averse from all good, from all which God loves, and prone to all evil, to every abomination which God hateth". (Wesley 1948, p. 79, emphasis mine)

The firm suggestion of the Order of Salvation is that anyone who is not Christian cannot offer meaningful insights or possess knowledge about life, reality, religion, and 'truth'. The discussion document paradoxically contrasts this suggestion insofar as its apparent willingness to include the experiences, traditions, and reason of African Indigenous cultures and religions as sources of religious or theological knowledge (DEWCOM 2023,

p. 11). The view of the discussion document becomes clearer when enculturation as a theoretical and practical tool is defined as follows:

> "[Enculturation is] identifying key components of the local culture and religion, and *comparing them to Gospel values*, where there is a clear correspondence between them, and where necessary, making the appropriate change. *There may be a change of both (faith and culture)*, producing a new way of expressing Christianity, *one which better resonates with the African experience*". (The Southern Cross 2010 in DEWCOM 2023, p. 13. Emphasis mine)

This quote reveals that the MCSA maintains the position that there are certain "Gospel values" that transcend both faith and "local culture and religion" and are primary to processes of enculturation. The creation of knowledge through dialogue between Methodism and African Indigenous phenomena requires that transcendental Gospel values be placed at the center, and that, through dialogue between culture and faith, an Africanized Methodist Christianity can be produced.

The use of language within the discussion document's methodology and theoretical framing further reveals elements of MCSA epistemology. Several African Indigenous terms are introduced as relevant to the discourse on *ukuthwasa* in the discussion document. A section titled 'Definitions and Concepts' provides terms with translations and descriptions in English (DEWCOM 2023, pp. 6–7). Terms and concepts critical to understanding *ukuthwasa* are described in this section, including *umndiki*, which is "an ancestral spirit that requires a person to undergo *ukuthwasa*"; *impepho*, which is "a sage plant which, when dried, is used to communicate with the ancestors"; and *abalozi*, which means being "possessed and trained through the whistles... Normally it is ancestors who do the whole training themselves through dreams, and in dreams." (DEWCOM 2023, pp. 6–7). The inclusion of this section provides the opportunity for the MCSA to integrate new concepts, terms, and language into normative MCSA discourses regarding the African Indigenous and *ukuthwasa*.

Notably, whilst several colonially inherited Wesleyan and Methodist terms and concepts are discussed, described, and integrated into the methodology and theoretical framing of the discussion document, none of the terms described in the 'Definitions and Concepts' section are overtly integrated therein (see DEWCOM 2023, pp. 9–14). There is some evidence of integration of some African Indigenous concepts presented in the 'Definitions and Concepts' section later in the discussion document, for example, in suggestions that dreams from ancestors may be legitimate sources of theological knowledge for the MCSA (DEWCOM 2023, p. 19). Generally, however, primacy in the discussion document is given to terms, concepts, and tools inherited from colonial Europe and the West. In the case of ancestral dreams, their legitimacy as a source of knowledge is presented as worth considering by placing them as an experience within the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and evaluating the validity of ancestors communicating through dreams against accounts of God speaking through dreams "in scripture" (DEWCOM 2023, pp. 18–19). Their validity is thus not found within Indigenous expressions or terms, but in their suitability to be translated into familiar Christian lexicon and concepts.

5. Interrogating Methodist Engagements with *Ukuthwasa*

I employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a tool for analyzing the discussion document as a document that contains the ambitions of the postcolonial MCSA and the seeming persistence of Whiteness therein. CDA utilizes a variety of theoretical frameworks that overlap in seeking to name and disrupt asymmetry and hegemony in society (Van Dijk 2001, p. 354). CDA considers power to be a discursive phenomenon and, as such, the interrogation of discourse disrupts harmful negotiations of power that constitute social

imaginaries (Van Dijk 2001, p. 353). CDA is used to interrogate how social groups exercise power and control and how particular resources can be accessed and negotiated, including knowledge and how knowledge is produced (Van Dijk 2001, p. 355). CDA analyzes written texts to explore how language is grounded in historical context and deployed to position readers and addressees in particular locations, thereby creating, recreating, and/or preserving asymmetry and imbalance (Mogashoa 2014, p. 105). CDA can be utilized effectively in tandem with my chosen theoretical framing to interrogate potentially enduring power asymmetries maintained and/or produced through the intersection of race and religion in the MCSA. CDA is thus a fitting analytical tool for exploring the ways in which the epistemology of the MCSA, as revealed primarily in the methodology and theoretical framing of the discussion document, obscure the possible persistence of Whiteness as privileged in the MCSA. It is useful to begin first with analysis of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

The discussion document is an attempt to create religious knowledge with a broad epistemic horizon for the MCSA through its inclusion of African Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Settler 2025), African Indigenous cultural and religious experiences, and recognition of historically othered voices (Naidoo 2016). However, in choosing the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a methodology, the discussion document centers and reinforces a normative set of cultural and epistemic assumptions found in colonial Methodism (Maia 2024, p. 1). The Quadrilateral was birthed with embedded assumptions of epistemic superiority, considering Wesley's argument that non-Christians ('heathens') had entirely insufficient knowledge of truth and reality due to original sin[6]. Colonial Methodism reinforced this superiority in knowledge and in being, considering the knowledge and personhood of African Indigenous people as fundamentally inferior to their own. It is for this reason that Indigenous groups needed to be converted, so they may be moved closer to the knowledge and humanity of superior white Christian European colonizers (Chidester 1996, p. 10). Thus, by being presented in the discussion document as a universal approach to knowledge production that simply 'equips' people in their thinking, the logic of white colonial superiority remains concealed (Mignolo 2009, p. 20) and embedded in the Quadrilateral as a method and the knowledge it is used to produce (Maia 2024).

This reinforcement of colonial norms and logics is further highlighted by the way in which the discussion document orients knowledge and knowledge production around white bodies. It is reflective of what Sara Ahmed (2020, p. 5) describes as the nefarious way in which Whiteness uses opportunities to invite relegated bodies into discourses to once again centralize white bodies through citations. In order to be considered in the production of knowledge, and, in fact, in order to exist at all, one must be 'in step' with white men, as someone historically excluded from the conversation (Sara Ahmed 2020, p. 6). While there is a subtle reimagination of reason, tradition, and experience in the Quadrilateral in the discussion document, the validity of Indigenous knowledge and practices is tied to them being included and interpreted through a white, colonial, methodological frame[7]. Primacy is also regularly given to traditions inherited through colonial Methodism, such as in the use of Wesley's Order of Salvation, which, as I argued previously, retains embedded notions of Christian epistemic superiority and 'heathen' epistemic inferiority. Indigenous methodologies and knowledge, critical approaches, and those who have historically been excluded from conversations for producing knowledge on *ukuthwasa* within the MCSA are thus silenced or marginalized, positioned as inferior to knowledges and approaches embedded with colonial norms.

The embeddedness of Whiteness and white colonial norms within the Quadrilateral is further revealed through the primacy it places on Christian Scripture as a source of knowledge. While the possibility of producing decolonial, liberative religious knowledge with the Quadrilateral and the Christian Bible as critical tools exists, their usefulness

for theological knowledge production is not the focus of my argument. However, it is notable that, while some advances in contemporary scholarship are included in the discussion of the Christian Bible, such as the use of hermeneutics (DEWCOM 2023, p. 9), the approach of the document still places primacy on 'Scripture' as the 'word of God' in textual, oral, and 'revealed' forms (DEWCOM 2023, p. 10). Critical Methodist biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala has noted that the use of 'word of God' reveals a "captivity to the ideological assumptions of white theology" (Mosala 1987, p. i). Furthermore, the phrase 'word of God' is an appeal to transcendence that subtly places the Christian Bible's contents, usages, and interpretations beyond critique and interrogation. This is reflective of coloniality within Christianity, seeking to frame Christianity as transcending ideology and history (Van den Heever 2001, p. 3). The approach taken by the discussion document allows the white Methodist colonial norms that have informed interpretations of the Christian Bible, its contents, and usages in Southern Africa to continue as uninterrogated ideological assumptions.

The discussion document in its theoretical framing appeals to universal Christian Creeds and 'Gospel values'. Of primary importance for this analysis is the term 'Gospel'. It is not the purpose of this article to contend whether universal values do or do not exist. However, the positioning of 'Gospel values' as universal inherently places the notion of the 'Gospel' as transcending cultural, historical, and ideological influence. The notion of the 'Gospel' is never thoroughly discussed or interrogated in the discussion document. This silence is deafening, considering that the Gospel was of critical importance for civilizing and Christianizing Indigenous groups through colonial Methodism, as discussed in my section on postcolonial religion. Through this move toward transcendence, embedded colonial norms of white Christian superiority remain embedded and reinforced in the discussion document. Simultaneously to this move, African Indigenous culture and religion are positioned as local and contextual in the discussion document. Christian knowledge acts as the primary vehicle of interpretation, placing primacy on the 'Gospel' and the subtly concealed white colonial norms it contains, suggesting that African Indigenous culture and religion are inferior and should be interpreted through this lens. Furthermore, through this positioning of Christian knowledge, the colonially informed notion that white Western knowledge production processes are critical tools for the creation of knowledge about life, faith, reality, and Black African bodies and histories is reinforced.

The asymmetrical positioning of inherited European and Western language, concepts, and terms for understanding and interpreting *ukuthwasa* above African Indigenous ones further reinforces colonially inherited norms of knowledge production within the MCSA. The discussion document provides English descriptions and definitions of African Indigenous concepts and terms, creating the potential for allowing African Indigenous language, terms, and concepts to inform the MCSA's epistemology. However, the discussion document does this without effectively integrating African Indigenous terms and concepts into its methodology or theoretical framework. Whilst seemingly presenting an epistemology that considers the value of "African cultural perspectives" (DEWCOM 2023, p. 9), the discussion document requires that African Indigenous terms and concepts be adjudicated and authenticated by inherited colonial terms, concepts, and tools. Critical nuances regarding *ukuthwasa* contained within African Indigenous language, terms, and concepts are lost through their marginalization in the discussion document. Simultaneously, an epistemic horizon regarding *ukuthwasa* is established within colonially inherited white religious, socio-cultural, and linguistic limits for those who utilize the discussion document.

6. Contesting Lived Religion with Self-Assertion: Moves Toward Domestication and Civilizing

The discussion document uses the tools analyzed above, informed by the MCSA's epistemology, as means of establishing a normative Methodist discourse on *ukuthwasa*, African traditional religions, and African Indigenous cultures in Southern Africa. The normative discourse that the MCSA seeks to establish can be termed as a move toward orthodoxy and orthopraxy: seeking to establish right/true beliefs and practice in relation to *ukuthwasa* for Methodists in Southern Africa. The approach taken by the discussion replicates white European colonial approaches to religious knowledge and religious praxis, seeking a singular, homogeneous, and unified orthodoxy and orthopraxy to which constituents are expected to subscribe, ultimately shaping their everyday religious life and actions. In such a framing of religion, the religious institution acts as the purveyor of 'truth' and the members thereof are vessels for depositing, containing, replicating, and disseminating that 'truth' in thoughts and acts (Ammerman 2003). Such an approach stands in stark contrast to lived religion, and the reality of plurality of belief, thought, ideology, and praxis in postcolonial contexts.

A brief turn to my lived experience as an ex-probationer (in-training) minister of the MCSA further reveals these dynamics. I make this turn not seeking to center my experience, but rather to highlight my lived engagements with practitioners and members of the MCSA in these discussions. I was an in-training probation minister in the MCSA for three years. During my time as an in-training minister, I was present for several discussions that used the discussion document as a guiding tool across various structural levels and geographic contexts of the MCSA. I was part of engagements with laity and clergy, young and old people, people of varying ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. These lived engagements highlight further nuances of the machinations of the MCSA's epistemology in everyday religious settings.

Two experiences were fundamental to my participation in these conversations. The first experience is that, in almost every instance, the conversation was deferred to be led by clergy rather than Indigenous practitioners or laity. My positionality was often centered and, with no proximity to *ukuthwasa* other than the discussion document, I was often the one leading and directing conversations by appointment of these meetings. This reveals a continuing impulse within the MCSA to defer to religious leaders for directing conversations as purveyors of truth. This is notably similar to colonial reliance on clergy and religious leaders as purveyors of universal religious truth. It is also reflective of privilege granted through Whiteness, as argued by contemporary Whiteness scholars. I was granted undue privilege to 'move through space' that was not mine (Ahmed 2007) and to carry out whatever behaviour I saw fit (Steyn 2005) in this space. My second experience is that discussions were not homogeneous and were often contested. A common theme of conversation was questions of the following framing: 'we know about *ukuthwasa* and traditional practices, why does the MCSA feel like we need to have this conversation?'. My experience was that many clergy and laity members were concerned that the MCSA was involving itself in conversations in which it did not need to participate. At the same time, there were also many clergy and laity members who strongly supported this move from the MCSA, arguing that a clear doctrinal and practical stance on the matter was long overdue.

These experiences contribute two key insights to theoretical discourses on postcolonial churches and their attempts at self-assertion. The first is unsurprising: the practice of *ukuthwasa*, African traditional religion, and African culture by Methodist clergy and laity has occurred without the permission or codification of the MCSA. The MCSA, in producing this discussion document, seeks to regulate a phenomenon that was birthed in resistance to initial doctrinal positions evident in colonialism. The practice of both ATR and Methodism

by Methodist clergy and laity members continues despite the MCSA having no formal doctrinal and polity stance thereon contemporaneously. Regulation by the MCSA is attempted through the discussion document, which is informed by the MCSA's established epistemic horizon. Through this move towards regulation the discussion document continues to reinforce embedded, white colonial norms in the MCSA through its epistemology and, at times, through its preference for the white bodies preferred by white colonial norms. This feeds into the second insight that lived religion amongst Methodists continues to be reflective of both acceptance and rejection of what the MCSA expects of its constituents. Within the MCSA, there is an impetus to prevent its constituents from living out religion in ways the institution has not dictated. This impetus is primarily driven from a position of religious authority, interpreting and deciding what can and cannot be considered 'true religion', an impetus evident in the earliest origins of Methodism in Wesley's own work. Simultaneously, the desire for clearer doctrinal and polity positions reflects that there is also buy in from some Methodists for regulation in this regard. Thus, embedded Whiteness and colonial norms of polity and doctrine continue to be privileged both by the MCSA as an institution and, in some instances, members thereof.

The MCSA, through its epistemology as expressed in the discussion document, moves toward what Federico Settler (2010) describes as 'domestication of the indigenous'. Federico Settler (2010, p. 62) observes this dynamic in South African state engagements with Indigenous groups, noting that the approach taken by the South African government has sought to capture the 'vitality' of the Indigenous whilst also nullifying and pacifying the 'volatile' aspects therein. The desire to shape the Indigenous into something attractive and controllable reflects colonial interactions therewith, and positions Indigenous phenomena as barbaric, magical, and dangerous (Federico Settler 2010, p. 62). The MCSA's enchantment with the Indigenous is similar to governmental enchantment. It is an enchantment shrouded in "uneasiness" (Federico Settler 2010, p. 61), seeking to consider African Indigenous phenomena as meaningfully part of the life and identity of Methodism in Southern Africa whilst also seeking to contain how African Indigenous culture and religion may or may not be practiced, and how it may or may not be discussed. The MCSA conducts this domestication with a view to continue orienting itself around white bodies and embedded white colonial logics. This domestication similarly reflects what David Chidester (2017, p. 560) notes as present in colonial Christianity, namely the categorization of the Indigenous through Christian normative frameworks for the purpose of containment and control.

The MCSA, through the discussion document, further moves toward the attempted civilizing of *ukuthwasa* and African Indigenous practices. As I have argued to this point, the logic of colonial missionaries within the Methodist tradition was such that the Indigenous populace of Southern Africa could be considered human because they had the potential to be civilized and converted to Christianity. These two potentialities were essentially interconnected, and Christianity was given primary significance in producing 'real humans' out of Indigenous peoples. The civilizing move of the discussion document embraces a similar logic. Through interpreting *ukuthwasa* and the African Indigenous in the language and logic of Methodism, they can be considered as valid and, by extension, human. Humanity is granted through proximity to, and transformation by, that which is Christian. As I have detailed, that which is Christian in the MCSA is still shaped and informed by embedded white colonial norms. The racialized social imaginary of the Methodist colonizer is thus reproduced through this move: through Methodism, the African Indigenous can be 'civil', 'granting' the Indigenous humanity which is proximity to being white.

Simultaneously, the approach of those within the MCSA living out amalgamations of Christianity and African traditional religion and culture offers important insights for further

theorizing within postcolonial religion. Amid institutional self-assertion, these members of the MCSA embody their own epistemology and normative discourses, irrespective of what is or is not legislated or enforced. New insights into the complexity of what Methodism 'looks like' at the grassroots in Southern Africa will emerge through research that centers these often-marginalized experiences and recognizes their already extant legitimacy and humanity, embodied in 'everyday' orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Such research could offer potentially rich resources for subverting enduring colonial impetuses within the MCSA.

In seeking to address its inherited colonial impetuses, the MCSA could make a similar turn in its internal discourses surrounding African Indigenous cultures, religions, practices, beliefs and rituals. A critical centering of historically othered bodies, discourses, concepts, and epistemologies without requiring their civilizing and domestication by inherited Methodist and Wesleyan epistemology will enable a more just and equitable dialogue to emerge within the MCSA. Simultaneously, critical readings of history surrounding the inheritance of MCSA epistemology will enable processes of empowering the MCSA to move toward new epistemic horizons. Such critical readings of history invite a turn to the violent, forgotten, and obscured moments in MCSA history, teasing out the entanglements of inherited epistemology therein, and creatively imagining new possibilities of producing diverse knowledges in dialogue with African Indigenous epistemologies. This critical engagement with history should also include the centering of histories, discourses, and languages within the MCSA of members who have already produced knowledges from diverse epistemic locales in embodied, practical, and theological–theoretical forms. A process embracing diverse imaginings would be able to take seriously the variable ways in which Southern African Methodists experience and live out their cultures, identities, and faiths.

7. Conclusions

The MCSA's attempt at self-assertion through the above-described discussion document recreates, preserves, and privileges Whiteness. The MCSA seeks to assert itself as a religious authority within the framing of being an 'authentically African' Wesleyan–Methodist Christianity. However, in seeking to preserve the Wesleyan tradition of Methodism, it reinforces Whiteness as a 'transcendental norm' in its epistemology, orienting access to and production of religious knowledge around embedded white colonial norms and logics. The MCSA further attempts to codify, domesticate, and civilize Indigenous cultural and religious practices through this move of self-assertion, reinscribing colonial racialized social imaginaries in its normative discourses. The epistemological despair created and reinforced by the methodology and theoretical framework of the discussion document suggests that the MCSA needs to radically rethink its epistemic foundations if it seeks to move away from its colonial, white history. There is evidence that Wesleyan traditions of Christianity need to be broadly interrogated for their potential participation in producing, reproducing, and preserving Whiteness, colonial norms, and racialized imaginations of the human. As Sara Ahmed (2020, p. 9) argues, "It takes conscious willed and wilful effort not to reproduce an inheritance".

Funding: This research received no external funding, but this paper was produced in the context of the International Research Training Group 'Transformative Religion: Religion as situated knowledge in processes of social transformation', funded by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) and the German Research Foundation (DFG).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] *Ukuthwasa* is an African Indigenous term describing being called to the office of a sacred specialist such as a traditional healer or herbalist (Booi 2004, p. 3). It further refers to the ritual processes of becoming a traditional healer, noting that a person called upon by their ancestors must then be trained in order to become a sacred specialist (Mkhize 2011). The term deployed specifically by the MCSA is *isangoma* (DEWCOM 2023, p. 2). *iSangoma* is not a universal term that applies to all Indigenous African cultures, but is a term regularly used by various Nguni tribes to describe being called to the above described office. Booi (2004, pp. 2–3) further describes *ukuthwasa* as the "healing sickness", a calling often resisted and characterized by varying symptoms including, but not limited to, hallucinations, confusion, delusion, violence, aggression, and dreaming.

[2] William Shaw was the first superintendent of South Eastern African Methodism and the first Methodist minister to British colonial settlers arriving in South Africa in 1820 (see William Shaw 1861).

[3] I use the term 'coloniality' throughout the article when referring to enduring legacies of colonialism. There are various forms of coloniality, including the coloniality of power, being, knowledge, and nature (see Maldonado-Torres 2014).

[4] Conference is the highest decision-making body of the MCSA. When Conference gathers once per year, decision-making powers are given by Methodist members to delegates (including the Connexional Executive) to attend Conference and exercise this power on their behalf (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016, pp. 53–54).

[5] Wesleyan heritage refers to the history and traditions garnered from being within the broader scope of denominations and Christian traditions informed by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement in 18th-century England.

[6] Even though Wesley acknowledged the possibility of some knowledge outside 'true religion' and Christian conversion, he also argued that despair is the epistemic and eschatological result for those who are not truly converted Christians (Wesley 1948, p. 17).

[7] Sara Ahmed (2020, p. 7) notably argues that citing white men can be a tool for disrupting the continued privileging of Whiteness in scholarship. This is important to note, as perhaps the Quadrilateral can be disrupted and 'queered', as she frames it (Sara Ahmed 2020, p. 7), to disrupt Whiteness. This requires active criticality and disruption of order, logic, and form, all of which are only partially present in the discussion document.

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