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Revival, Revolution and Reform in Global Methodism: An Understanding of Christian Perfection as African Christian Humanism in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Dion A. Forster

Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, Stellenbosch, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article will begin with a discussion of the distinctive ways in which the notion of Christian perfection is understood in Southern African Methodism by reflecting on how Methodists in Southern Africa have understood, perhaps even misunderstood, the emphasis on "social holiness" as a Christian response to the oppression of colonialism and apartheid on the African continent. It is contended that this understanding could be classified as a form of African Christian humanism. In order to show this, the article will highlight aspects of Christian humanism and the African worldview that correlate with Southern African appropriations of Methodist and Wesleyan theology. Reference is made to Nelson Mandela's faith, which was formed within this theological framework. He developed his own faith in response to significant Black South African Methodists (such as the founders of the African National Congress, the founder of the Pan African Congress, and the founders of the Black Methodist Consultation) and Methodist communities (such as Churches, schools and chaplaincies). The paper argues that humanism, which has its roots in Christian theological and social ethics, became distinctively African through the work and witness of Southern African Methodists.

KEYWORDS

Methodism; Christian perfection; black theology; African theology; South Africa; ethics; christian humanism

Introduction[1]

In this article, we shall consider one of the ways in which Wesleyan, and Methodist, Theology has been received and adopted outside of its context of origin. We shall do so by focusing on Southern African Methodism. This is an exercise in considering the possibilities of decolonising Wesleyan and Methodist theologies around the world. It will be shown that African Christian humanism is an important theological perspective among contemporary Southern African Methodists. This theological tenet will be brought into conversation with Wesleyan soteriology. In particular, we shall consider Wesley's notion of Christian

CONTACT Dion A. Forster dionforster@sun.ac.za Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, Stellenbosch Central, Stellenbosch 7600, South Africa

[1]This article first emerged as a lecture given for the Fernley Hartley Trust in the summer of 2018. I would like to begin by expressing my sincere thanks to the Trustees of the Fernley Hartley Trust for the honour of delivering the 2018 Fernley Hartley Trust lecture. I am particularly grateful for this opportunity, and the investment that makes it possible, since it gives voice to a contribution from Southern African Methodist theological scholarship.

perfection as part of the order of salvation. The discussion begins by presenting the distinctive ways in which the notion of Christian Perfection has come to be expressed and understood within Southern African Methodism. In particular it will be shown how Methodists in Southern Africa have understood the Wesleyan emphasis on social justice (mistakenly related to "social holiness") as a Christian response to the oppression of colonialism and apartheid on the African continent in general, and the Southern African sub-continent in particular. The article also considers how aspects of Christian humanism and an African worldview correlate with Southern African appropriations of Methodist and Wesleyan theology. It is further argued that aspects of Southern African social identity, expressed as a form of intersubjective ontology (what is collectively termed in the popular social imagination as "*ubuntu*"), became the hermeneutical lens through which the re-humanisation of persons was sought in the midst of the dehumanising abuses of colonialism and apartheid. This can be related to Wesley's understanding of Christian Perfection with particular reference to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* – becoming truly and fully human, like Jesus the true, or archetypical, human. The result of the intersection of Wesleyan emphases on social justice, Christian humanism, and African social identity, is an understanding of Christian Perfection as a form of African Christian Humanism among Southern African Methodists.

The article begins by locating Southern African Methodism in relation to South Africa's historical context. Next, it offers some insight into the loss of confidence in the Western social, political and economic project, with its consequences of individualism, secularism and rampant capitalism, among Southern African Methodists. It is shown how this reality has contributed towards a resurgence of interest in Christian humanism in contemporary theological discourse. Next, it is suggested that there is some coherence between Christian humanism and Wesleyan ethics (with particular reference to its emphasis on social holiness). Finally, we consider how African social identity brings together aspects of Wesleyan social holiness (as emphasised in Christian Perfection), with aspects of Christian Humanism, to arrive at an understanding of Christian Perfection as a form of African Christian Humanism.

The Appropriation of Wesleyan "Social Holiness" and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa

Ross Olivier describes the arrival of Methodism in Southern Africa using the metaphor of a potted plant. He writes that when the missionaries brought the Gospel, "it was in the form of a potted plant", he suggests that it is "your task [as Africans] to remove it from the constraints of the pot and plant it in your African soil so that it would be nurtured by African nutrients".[2]

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa is a predominantly Black, South African Christian Church in the Wesleyan theological tradition that was shaped and formed by its unique history and context. Its theological identity is shaped by its Wesleyan and Methodist roots. Yet, the context of Southern African history, particularly, the experiences of colonialism and apartheid, as well as the social identities of the predominantly Black South African membership, have been the soil and nutrients in which it grew and flourished, leading to unique African appropriations of Wesleyan doctrines.

[2]Ross Olivier in, Richardson and Malinga, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa*, 5.

Methodism came to South Africa in 1795, just 4 years after John Wesley's death in 1791. Millard notes that the first record of a Methodist in Southern Africa was in the *Christian Magazine and Evangelical Repository* (1802). The Methodist in question was named John Irwin. He was an Irish soldier who had been stationed at the Cape of Good Hope between 1795 and 1803.[3] The first Methodist lay preacher in Southern Africa was a soldier of the 72nd regiment of the British army named George Middlemiss. Middlemiss had been stationed in the Cape of Good Hope to secure British interests there in 1805 as a result of the war between Britain and France.[4] He soon gathered a small group of fellow Methodists soldiers and settlers in the Cape around himself in a "class meeting".

This work grew quickly as the settler population expanded. By the time Sergeant Kendrick, a Methodist class leader and lay preacher, arrived and took over the small congregation in 1812, the congregation numbered 142 persons, of which 128 were of British descent and 14 were of "mixed race".[5] The first full-time Methodist minister in the Cape was the Reverend Barnabas Shaw who arrived with his wife Jane in 1816. He is noted for his commitment to training indigenous clergy, and by 1822 he had already put forward the name of the African convert, Jacob Links, as a "native assistant missionary".[6] With the arrival of the first official group of British settlers at the Cape in 1820, of which many were Methodists, Methodism was already well established as a religious movement in Southern Africa.

From this period onwards, missionaries were despatched from England to establish and spread Methodist work throughout the sub-continent. They did this with great courage, sacrifice, and faith.[7] By 1860 there were 132 Methodist ministers and missionaries in Eastern Cape and Natal, and their combined congregations numbered around 5000 members.[8]

What made Methodist mission unique was that from its inception it was multiracial in nature. While other churches and mission organisations segregated their efforts, concentrating almost exclusively on one racial group at a time (either working among the White settlers, or the indigenous African peoples), the Methodists established joint work.[9] Charlotte Maxeke, a significant African Christian leader (1874–1939) who was instrumental in bringing the African Methodist Episcopal Church to Southern Africa, reflected on the work of the Methodist missionaries in the early 1900s saying, "The early [Methodist] missionaries in this country knew what they were doing … They lived with us"[10]. In part, this commitment to a shared social location by Methodist missionaries led to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa having more Black members than any of the other mainline denominations in South Africa.[11] Moreover, de Gruchy notes that at the same

[3]Millard, "Re-Appropriating Wesley for Africa," 133; also see Millard in, *Methodism in Southern Africa*, 31–32.
[4]Balia, *Black Methodists and White Supremacy in South Africa*, 14.
[5]Mears, *Methodism in the Cape*, 6.
[6]Millard, "Re-Appropriating Wesley for Africa," 135.
[7]A superb account of early Methodist missionaries who lost their lives in Southern Africa is written by Jackson, *Methodist South African martyrs – are they also saints?*
[8]For a helpful and detailed discussion of the work of early Southern African Methodist missionaries please see Attwell, *The Methodist church*, Attwell, *The Methodist Church*, 3–6. Please also refer to Millard, "Re-Appropriating Wesley for Africa," 133–46; Forster and Bentley, *Methodism in Southern Africa*, 13–39.
[9]See for example, Grassow, "William Shaw," 13–25.
[10]quoted in, Millard, "Re-Appropriating Wesley for Africa," 136.
[11]Hofmeyr and Pillay, *Perspectives on Church History*, 253.

time the Methodist Church became the largest so-called mainline Church denomination in the country, a reality that persists to this day.[12] Methodism continued to spread throughout Southern Africa for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Even at this early stage it was clear that the Wesleyan emphasis on social justice, which was a characteristic of Wesleyan Methodism in Britain, was a significant focus in the emergence of the identity and theology of Southern African Methodism. In contemporary Southern African Methodism, this expression is often mistakenly labelled as emphasising "social holiness".[13] As will be shown, the South African appropriation of this concept understood that Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, entails both religious piety and an engagement in the work of social justice. Of course, this is not how Wesley initially used the term "social holiness", or intended his use of it to be understood.[14] Wesley used the term in reference to Christian fellowship, seeking to counter the increasingly privatising tendencies in Christian faith in eighteenth century England.[15] Thompson rightly points out that the contemporary understanding of "social justice" is a different concept from Wesley's term "social holiness" (which had to do with cultivating holiness among small groups of believers in bands and class meetings). In addition, contemporary Southern African Methodist understandings of social justice and early Methodists understandings of works of charity, social engagement, and even political activity differ. We cannot simply equate what we understand by social justice with the mission and ministry of early Methodists. The meaning of the terms differ from one another based on the historical and social contexts within which they were used.

Nonetheless, Methodist work and witness in Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries displayed a strong emphasis on the need to engage not only in the work of evangelism, and the fostering of personal piety, but also to undertake the work of social transformation and justice as an expression of Christian witness and discipleship.[16] Naturally some of the attempts at social transformation and development had a decidedly Western, and even blatantly colonial, slant to them. It would be untrue to say that the early Methodist missionaries did not share in the colonial identities and aspirations of their contemporaries.[17] Perhaps one of the clearest examples of such colonial "blindness" was that the 1820 settlers to the Eastern Cape region were settled on land that was expropriated from the indigenous AmaXhosa people to whom the missionaries were sent.[18] Notwithstanding, the emphasis on social justice (expressed and understood as holiness)[19] in these early years included projects such as:

[12]De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 14.
[13]cf., Grassow in Richardson and Malinga, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa*, 87–95.
[14]Thompson, "From Societies to Society," 141–45.
[15]The following quote from the preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739) provides the context to John Wesley's use of the term 'social holiness'. He writes, "Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy Solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than Holy Adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection." Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, viii.
[16]cf., Olivier in Richardson and Malinga, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa*, 9–11.
[17]Millard, "Re-Appropriating Wesley for Africa," 136–41; also see Millard in, Forster and Bentley, *Methodism in Southern Africa*, 31–32.
[18]cf., Grassow, "William Shaw," 13–25.
[19]The particular understanding of 'social holiness' in Southern African Methodism will be discussed in some detail the next section of this article.

- The establishment of schools to serve the settler as well as the indigenous African population.[20] The translation of the first complete Bible into a Southern African language (the isiXhosa translation of the Bible was completed in 1833 under the guidance of the Wesleyan missionaries William Boyce and Barnabas Shaw at the Wesleyan Mission Press at Mount Coke)[21], as well as the distribution and publication of other forms of Christian literature in the vernacular.
- Offering medical care to all (not only the settler population), and the establishment of mission hospitals for local communities.[22]
- Making Methodist "glebe" land available for freed slaves to farm and inhabit as free citizens after the emancipation of slaves was propagated in the colonies.[23]
- The establishment of homes for orphans and senior citizens, as well as caring for the poor and destitute.[24]
- The engagement of the political rulers for religious freedom at the Cape. It is worth remembering that the state religion at the time of the arrival of the first Methodists in Southern Africa was the Church of England (Anglican). All other faith groupings had to apply for the right to gather in formal worship and engage in missionary endeavour. There are numerous examples of conflict between Methodists and the Governor of the Cape Colony, both for the religious rights of indigenous peoples, and also for the general right to establish Methodist societies for worship and care.

These are just a few illustrative examples of the early emphasis on social, economic and political wellbeing that was a common feature of the work of early Methodists in Southern Africa.[25]

However, the social and political turmoil that unfolded in South Africa from the early twentieth century onwards played a very important role in the unique development and appropriation of Methodist theology on African soil. It is difficult to deny that the rise, implementation, and eventual demise of the racial ideology of "apartheid" was one of the most significant social and political forces that informed social identity, which the church had to contend with, in South Africa during the twentieth century. This is particularly poignant when one considers that it was Christianity that provided the theological and moral sanction for racial segregation – indeed certain forms of racist Christianity where the "software" that allowed the "hardware" of the apartheid state to function with brutal efficiency.

As the apartheid government implemented the system of racial segregation and oppression from the early 1940s, it led to many South Africans being dehumanised and forcibly

[20]Gqubule, "Methodism and Education," 73–86.
[21]Van Der Merwe, *Contemporary Translation Studies and Bible Translation*, 14.
[22]Millard, "Re-Appropriating Wesley for Africa," 133–46; Pritchard, *Methodists and Their Missionary Societies 1900–1996*, 24, 285.
[23]Whiteside, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of South Africa*, 89; Welsh, *A History of South Africa*, 35–36; Moister, *A History of Wesleyan Missions, in All Parts of the World, from their Commencement to the Present Time*, 232.
[24]Richardson and Malinga, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa*, 7, 19–24, 87–97.
[25]For a discussion of how the Methodist Church of Southern African appropriated social concern and justice as an expression of Christian mission please see, *Prophetic witness and social action as holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's mission* Forster, "Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Mission," 411–34. Please also see Bentley, "Methodism and Transformation in South Africa," 8–pages; Mtshiselwa, "The Emergence of the Black Methodist Consultation and Its Possible Prophetic Voice in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Original Research," 1–9. for examples of this continuing witness to social justice in recent decades.

removed from their ancestral lands. The land itself was expropriated and either put to use by the apartheid government or sold to White South Africans. In order to maintain this system of racial segregation and White privilege, Black persons were forced to remain in the Black "homelands" that were far from the economic and political centres of South Africa. Various other apartheid laws were employed to systematically oppress Black South Africans. Black citizens were economically disenfranchised through job reservation, Bantu Education, inadequate health care, the removal of freedom of association, and even the curtailment of the freedom of movement. The violent and systematic implementation of this evil system had considerable, and damaging, effects on Southern African society as a whole, and particularly on the individual Black South Africans who suffered under it. Moreover, as has been mentioned, the complicit role of Christians and Christianity in apartheid had an extremely damaging effect on society, and the mission and witness of the Church. The effects of apartheid are still experienced many generations after its political end.[26]

In the process of conducting this research, however, it was established that the the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), as a denomination, in various congregations, through Church leaders and members made statements, protested, and worked against apartheid in many ways between the ideology's formal political adoption in 1948 and its downfall in 1994. Every copy of the minutes of Conference (the annual Synod of the MCSA) in this era contained evidence[27] of the Church's struggle to undermine the false theology that supported the apartheid system. As a result of this, the MCSA was the only Church (denomination) to be declared illegal under apartheid laws (on 12th January 1978).[28]

Where did the theological and moral conviction stem from that allowed the denomination to shape its ministry and witness in this manner?

The Unbearable and Offensive Task of Working for Perfection in an Imperfect World

Most Methodist and Wesleyan scholars agree that the order of salvation is an important, even a central, focus in John Wesley's theology. The following quote from 1746 shows the theological importance that Wesley placed on the *ordo salutis*:

> Our main doctrines, which include all the rest are three: that of repentance, of faith and holiness. The first of these we account, as were the porch of religion, the next the door; the third religion itself.[29]

As can be seen, the element of the order of salvation that Wesley regarded as "religion itself" is Christian Perfection (expressed as "holiness" in the quote above). He believed

[26]Please see the following sources in the bibliography for more information South African apartheid and the churches Elphick and Davenport, *Christianity in South Africa*; Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*; De Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*; Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*.

[27]In order to establish this information, the researcher read the address of the President (later Presiding Bishop) to each conference, the resolutions, and the reports to the British Conference (when the Southern African conference still reported to Britain), and later the annual reports from the Minutes of Conference for each year between 1948 and 1994.

[28]Kalley, Schoeman, and Andor, *Southern African Political History*, 435. Of course many other Christian ministries and organisations were investigated and declared illegal during apartheid – most notable among these was the Christian Institute, founded by the Dutch Reformed cleric, Beyers Naudé. However, the MCSA was the only denomination to be declared illegal within the borders of South Africa, i.e., within the Transkei.

[29]Wesley in Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 286.

that Christian Perfection was a peculiar emphasis and heritage that had been given to the Methodist movement by God. In 1789, just two years before his death, Wesley writes in defence of his emphasis on Christian Perfection,

> This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.[30]

What Wesley understood to be the aim and substance of Christian Perfection,[31] warrants closer scrutiny. Moreover, his emphasis on Christian Perfection was not without critique from his contemporaries. He engages this in his sermon on Christian Perfection. He writes, "[t]here is scarce any expression in Holy Writ which has given more offence than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them".[32] It was Wesley's emphasis on holiness as perfection, and the practical expression of holiness through piety, justice and mercy in everyday life, not only in private devotion but holiness in community, that first led to him and his colleagues to being labelled "Methodists".[33]

Thus, for Wesley the purpose of "religion" was to bring a person towards Christian Perfection – which was not only a state of spiritual rightness with God (piety), but also a state of public rightness before God with all persons and creation (justice). This is the Christian's necessary expression of devotion and piety in daily life. It is important to note that Wesley's ethics, indeed his religion, is a social ethic, a communal religion. In other words, he understood that the Church, and in particular the class meeting, was a "social" space in which persons were formed and held accountable for their growth in sanctification. Thompson points out that "the adjective", "social" in Wesley's "social holiness", is used "in its original Latin sense of *socialis*, describing those allied together for a common purpose".[34] Thus, true holiness cannot exist in its solitary form – it is social in nature, and therefore, has clear social requirements, expectations, consequences, and social responsibilities. He called this true religion, and true holiness (as opposed to false religion and false holiness).[35]

Wesley understood that there is a clear relationship between holiness as expressed in personal piety, and that expressed in a form of communal (social) ethics. Certainly, it is not a great stretch to equate this with certain aspects of what has become known as justice in contemporary Christianity.

This kind of social ethical responsibility, as a form of holiness, he maintained, is described in scripture (scriptural holiness), expressed in our interaction with others and the world around us (perfect love), and is the ultimate goal towards which we aspire (Christian Perfection).[36] True Christian Perfection is dependent upon both personal holiness and social holiness.

[30]Wesley in Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, 238.
[31]For a discussion on Wesley's use of terminology regarding Christian Perfection please see Forster *Wesleyan Spirituality*, 4–5.
[32]Wesley in Cox, *John Wesley's Concept of Perfection*, 11.
[33]For a thorough and insightful discussion of the broader elements of this argument see Baker, *Practical Divinity – John Wesley's Doctrinal Agenda for Methodism* Baker, "Practical Divinity–John Wesley's Doctrinal Agenda for Methodism," 7–16.
[34]Thompson, "From Societies to Society," 162.
[35]Wesley in the preface to the 1739 Methodist Hymn book cited in Thompson, 142.
[36]cf., Attwell, *What Wesley Believed and Taught*; Forster, *An Introduction to Wesleyan Spirituality (Wesley Society of South Africa)*, 4–5.

Southern African Methodists seemed to grapple deeply with what this would mean in their context. Was holiness only about personal piety? Was holiness only about what one did in the community of the Church? Or, was true holiness also something that should be experienced in one's broader social living – politically, economically, structurally? Thompson suggests, "Wesley not only argues *against* holiness in its solitary form; he asserts that such a holiness simply *does not exist*".[37] As we see in Wesley's sermons and writings this did not only relate to how Wesley used the term "social holiness" in the preface to *Hymns and Poems* (1739). Wesley's life and ministry shows an understanding holiness that is broader than just shared piety. True faith must be a balance between "works of piety" (individually and socially) and "works of mercy".[38]

Hence, Wesley understood that God's great plan for Methodists was to live out, and proclaim, Christian Perfection as the purpose and content of true religion. The aim of this true religion was to form the Christian community, and the individual Christian within that community, to participate with God in the work of renewal and transformation. As a consequence, this included both the personal and the structural (political) elements of life. Wesley's understanding of Christian Perfection is rooted in a communal social ethic. Notable Wesleyan theologians and historians such as Maddox, Campbell, Heitzenrater, and Rack have shown that Wesley's balance between personal piety and social engagement (i.e. the public expression of the values and beliefs of the Methodist community of faith) took shape as a response to the historical, social and religious context in which he lived.[39]

The needs of the poor and disenfranchised in eighteenth century England led him to formulate clear and pragmatic strategies for economic and moral development, upliftment, and reform. The aforementioned occurred while his experience within the Church of England led him to emphasise the need for spiritual renewal and commitment to religious piety.[40] Naturally one cannot divide Wesley's theological emphases rigidly into these two categories. However, they do assist us in understanding the pragmatic development of Wesley's ministry and theology in relation to Christian Perfection.[41]

So, from its inception Methodism was an evangelical movement, seeking to share the Gospel message and the reality of Gospel living with all persons, particularly, with the intention of emphasising the need to strive to honour God by seeking to attain Christian Perfection. A result of this approach is that the Methodist evangelical emphasis carried early Methodists throughout the world and transplanted this core theology into new contexts with different challenges and opportunities from those faced in Britain. The core Methodist understanding of living in obedience to God, and working for the restoration of God's image in persons and creation, thus took root in different geographical, cultural, economic and social contexts around the world. South African is one of those contexts.

[37]Thompson, "From Societies to Society," 161.

[38]Weems suggests there were seven areas of social holiness that Wesley encouraged Methodists to pay attention to. They are, the poor among us and, slavery, those who are in prison, persons who are caught in substance abuse (grain alcohol in Wesley's time), the political arena, war and peace, and education Weems, *John Wesley's Message Today*, 64–70.

[39]Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 381–90.

[40]Rack, 381–450.

[41]For a detailed and thorough discussion on the development of Wesley's understanding, and adaptation, of personal piety and communal (social) ethics within early Methodism please see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 165–80, 199–241, 261–80. Moreover, Richardson wrote a succinct and clear account of the balance between personal piety and acts of public witness and social engagement in the African context, see Richardson and Malinga, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa*, 161–72.

Methodists in Southern African came to see the task of the Church as being a bearer of hope in the midst of great social and political struggle. Ultimately, the denomination adopted the mission statement of working towards "A Christ healed Africa for the Healing of the Nations".[42] It was a focus on Wesleyan social ethics and social justice, as an expression of Christian Perfection, that led the MCSA to boldly stand against the apartheid Government's separation of races in the "Group Areas act" of 1950 and "Separate Amenities act" of 1953. In 1958 the Conference made the bold statement that came to be known as "One and Undivided". It said:

> Like other parts of the life of our country, the Church is facing choices which will determine her future development, and in particular the choice between unity and division. The Conference, in prayer and heart-searching, expressed its conviction that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided, trusting in the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition.[43]

This radical stance, to be "one and undivided", is seldom remembered within its original theological context. Due to the overbearing power of apartheid it has most often been seen primarily as a social response to the political abuses of the day. Of course, this is partly correct. However, the context within which this statement took shape was strongly linked to the Southern African Methodist understanding of Christian Perfection. That is, what it means to strive to live as God intended, the kind of holiness found in scripture, and to strive towards social relationships perfected in love, in spite of the pressure of unjust laws from without, and personal prejudices from within. The minutes of the 1958 annual Conference record:

> We do not pretend that there are no difficulties; barriers not only of prejudice but of real difference that will have to be subordinated to the love which the Holy Spirit implants in our hearts. *But this will be an expression in life of the message for which Methodism was created, the message of Scriptural Holiness and Perfect Love*, whereby we follow our Lord in stretching out our hands to all men [sic] that they may be saved from all evil, and may be brought into the unity of the household of God. [emphasis added][44]

The members of Conference were instructed to find ways of embodying "Holiness and Perfect Love" in structural, social, political, economic, and ecclesial, forms. This resolution was a truly significant and courageous one, not only for its time, but also for the decades to come when the pressure to segregate and give over to the evil and injustice of apartheid would significantly increase.

One of the most vivid examples of how the 1958 statement inspired courageous social action is to be found in the ministry of Peter Storey and the Buitenkant Street Methodist Church in Cape Town. Between 1956 and 1981 Storey worked against the Nationalist Government's forced removal of Brown and Black South Africans (many of whom were Methodists) in District Six, Cape Town. The multiracial Methodist congregation in Buitenkant Street, District Six, was significantly disrupted by the forced removals. The Church naturally opposed the removals in every possible way. Yet when the removals

[42]This statement was adopted as the "Mission Charter" of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa at the Annual Conference on 30 August 2005. See Forster and Bentley, *Methodism in Southern Africa*, 169–70.
[43]"Minutes of the 75th Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa," Minutes of Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa (Cape Town, 1958), 202.
[44]"Minutes of the 75th Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa," 202.

were eventually enacted with brutal force in 1966, the congregation decided to remain united in spite of the forced removal of some of their members to shanti towns on the edges of the city. Ministries of care and support for those who had been removed were set up. Transportation was arranged to bus the congregants the many miles from the settlement areas where they had been placed to the Church so that multi-racial services and meetings at the Church could continue unabated. A plaque was put on the front of the Church that reads:

> All who pass by remember with shame the many thousands of people who lived for generations in District Six and other parts of this city, and were forced to leave their homes because of the colour of their skins. Father forgive us … [45]

The 1958 statement had set the theological tone that shaped the mission of the Church to work towards the Christian ideal of scriptural holiness and perfect love in political terms.[46] As Gqubule notes, it was precisely such a theological emphasis among Methodists in Southern Africa that informed Albert Luthuli, an early president the African National Congress (ANC), winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960, and a Methodist lay preacher to take a courageous and costly stand against the evil of apartheid. Another example, from this period, is Robert Sobukwe, the founder of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and a Methodist Lay Preacher, who was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1960 to 1969, and continued to serve the struggle against apartheid while living under house arrest until his death in 1978. One could name a host of other prominent Methodist political figures, clergy and laity, that took a stand against apartheid because of the convictions of their faith.[47] The link between Methodist faith and political activity was thus evident in society at that time. With regard to the role and importance of the church in general, and the MCSA in particular, in the struggle against apartheid, Nelson Mandela (who was himself a prominent Southern African Methodist)[48] said:

> The sense of social responsibility that the religious community has always upheld found expression in your immense contribution to the efforts to rid our country of the scourge of racism and apartheid. When pronouncements and actions against the powers-that-be meant persecution and even death, you dared to stand up to the tyrants … The Methodist Church was the only Church to be declared an illegal organisation under apartheid, and for ten long years you were forbidden to operate *naat e Transkei bantustan* [here in the Transkei] … The Church, like all other institutions of civil society, must help all South Africans to rise to the challenge of freedom. As South Africa moves from resistance to reconstruction and from confrontation to reconciliation, the energy that was once dedicated to breaking apartheid must be harnessed to the task of building the nation.[49]

The discussion in the previous sections have shown that Methodism in Southern Africa had a particular concern for the wellbeing of human persons in a social and a political sense. The contextual concerns of Africans, and the plight of Black South Africans, were particularly important in shaping Methodist theology and witness. Working for social justice and

[45]Cited in Theilen, "Gender, Race, Power and Religion," 33.
[46]For a more detailed discussion of the MCSA's understanding of working against Apartheid as an act of holiness and mission please see Forster, *Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's mission*, 411–34.
[47]Gqubule, "Methodism and Education," 80; also see, Forster, "Mandela and the Methodists," 91–95.
[48]For a detailed discussion of Mandela's relationship to the MCSA throughout his lifetime please see Forster, "Mandela and the Methodists."
[49]Mandela, "Address by President Nelson Mandela to the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church."

transformation was seen as a means of striving for Christian Perfection that has the wholeness and dignity of the human person, and society as a whole, as a central aim.

In the next section we consider two dominant informants in the shaping of the Southern African Methodist appropriation of Christian Perfection.

Christian Humanism and African Social and Religious Identities

The previous section argued that Southern African Methodism emphasised a social ethical approach to Christian Perfection and human wholeness as a result of the context in which it developed this theological emphasis in its work and witness. This section will make the connection to Christian humanism among South African Methodists, beginning with a discussion of the central tenets of Christian humanism. Then we shall narrow our focus to understanding how a Southern African social psyche, cultural identity, and religious identity, gave further shape to a form of African Christian humanism that is characteristic of Southern African Methodist theology and social ethics.

Christian Humanism and Wesleyan Theology

John de Gruchy notes that there has been a "critical retrieval of religious, theological and specifically Christian humanism … during the past decade".[50] Jens Zimmermann has written two important works on this subject, *Humanism and Religion,*[51] (which is addressed to secular humanists) and *Incarnational Humanism,*[52] (which is more theological, and so addressed to the Church and a Christian audience). These works have captured something of the importance of the rediscovery of humanism in general, and Christian humanism in particular, in contemporary theological thinking. This is particularly true for the majority world, and Christians in those regions.

Zimmermann's research suggests that the crisis of trust in the ideals of Western secular culture and society is a major factor in the resurgence of interest in humanism in general, and religious (and Christian) humanism, in particular.[53]

The vacuum that was left by the exhaustion of Western secularism, and particularly, the loss of transcendent and deeper meaning, has created an opening for the resurgence of frameworks of meaning, some of which are positive and life giving, others which are challenging and even destructive (such as forms of religious fundamentalism, nationalisms, and capitalism).[54] In such contexts, persons of faith have sought a more just and constructive religious and theological position through the retrieval of " … an ancient [form of] Christian humanism for our time in response to the general demand for a common humanity beyond religious, denominational and secular divides".[55]

As part of his exploration of the history of humanism, Zimmermann reminds the reader that its roots are deeply embedded in Patristic Christology and the Biblical conviction that human persons are bearers of the *imagio Dei*. De Gruchy notes,

[50]De Gruchy, "Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture," 195.
[51]Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion*.
[52]Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*.
[53]Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion*, 1.
[54]De Gruchy, "Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture," 196.
[55]Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 9–10.

> The claim that God becomes fully human in Christ in order that humans may become truly like God (divinization) and therefore truly human (humanization) is foundational for Christianity and finds embodiment in a new humanity in which human solidarity is expressed in Eucharistic community.[56]

It is precisely on this point that there is some coherence with Wesley and Methodism. Wesley's approach to communal virtue ethics was deeply informed by an adapted form of the Patristic doctrine of *theosis*.[57] Matsumoto notes that, "Wesley was particularly drawn to the Greek fathers who saw the goal of the Christian life as the restoration of the lost image of God".[58] As was argued earlier, Wesley believed that the doctrine of Christian Perfection, which he saw as the "grand depositum" of Methodism,[59] was intended to restore the true nature of humanity in perfect love to God and the rest of the world. In other words, we could say that Wesley was advocating an ecclesial virtue ethics that worked for the re-humanisation of persons in the image of the true human person, Jesus Christ.[60]

The result of this, "holiness of heart and life,"[61] is a significant emphasis on the human person as the bearer of the divine image that has a responsibility towards God and all of God's creation.

African Christian Humanism

The South African philosopher and activist, Steve Biko, wrote these words before his untimely death:

> … [Western society] seems to be very concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.[62]

Biko's quote gives voices to an important emphasis, and contribution, of a Southern African social identity. Namely, the importance of re-humanising society through authentic "human relationship". The emphasis upon human relationships with respect to intersubjective ontological humanity has been well developed in contemporary African scholarship.[63] Kasenene summarises an African traditional view of shared "humanity as relationship" in the following manner: "*Muthu u bebelwa nunwe,* 'A person is born for the other.'" Kasenene, continues, that this shows that "according to African philosophy, a person is a person through, with and for the community".[64] De Gruchy takes this

[56]De Gruchy, "Humanism, Religion and the Renewal of Culture," 196.
[57]For a detailed discussion of this theological concept in John Wesley's theology please see, Matsumoto, "John Wesley's Understanding of Man," 83–102. and Im *John Wesley's Theological Anthropology*.
[58]Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley's Agenda*, 125.
[59]Outler and Oden, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, 311.
[60]Forster, *An Introduction to Wesleyan Spirituality*, 5–6.
[61]Wesley, *The Works of the REV*, 260.
[62]Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 46.
[63]Broodryk, *Ubuntu*; Dreyer et al., *Practicing Ubuntu*; Eliastam, "Exploring Ubuntu Discourse in South Africa: Loss, Liminality and Hope," 1–8; Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*; Shutte, *Ubuntu*; Forster, "African Relational Ontology, Individual Identity, and Christian Theology an African Theological Contribution towards an Integrated Relational Ontological Identity," 243–53.
[64]Kasenene, "Ethics in African Theology," 141.

notion further when he makes a direct connection between Christian Humanism and notions of African relational ontology saying that the "biblical insistence that humans are 'in the image of God' is not a description of substance but of relation, responsibility, freedom and significance".[65] In other words, our theological conviction in a shared humanity, presents us with an ethical responsibility – because we are human, we bear responsibility for one another.

This theological and ethical understanding intersubjective ontological solidarity is a common feature of Southern African social identity.[66] Du Toit explains it as follows,

> For Africans, to be human is to participate in life and respect the conditions that make life possible. To participate in life means ultimately to participate in the fellowship of the community … African society emphasises solidarity rather than activity, and the communion of persons rather than their autonomy … That personhood is identified by an individual's interaction with other persons does not eliminate personal identity … It simply says that my personal identity comes to the fore in my interaction with, and place in, my community.[67]

This notion has most commonly, and popularly, been associated with the African philosophy and ethics of *Ubuntu*. Thorpe summarises the key aspects of this philosophy as:

> Health, balance, harmony, order, continuity are all key words. They not only describe a desirable present condition for individuals and the community, but also represent the goal towards which people constantly strive. This ideal needs to be maintained not only within the visible community but equally in relation to the invisible community, conceptualised as spiritual powers (e.g. the ancestors).[68]

One can see some coherence between these views, and the views on human dignity and social justice that our espoused by the prominent Methodist,[69]Nelson Mandela. He writes:

> I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.[70]

In Mandela's statement we find a recognition of the dignity of the human person that finds expression in the qualities of "mercy and generosity". Mandela expresses the shared recognition of the humanity of the other as expressed in ontological terms, "No one is born hating another person … ", and "Man's [sic] goodness is a flame that can be hidden but

[65]De Gruchy, *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, 63.
[66]cf., Forster, "African Relational Ontology, Individual Identity, and Christian Theology," 243–51.
[67]Du Toit, *The Integrity of the Human Person in an African Context*, 33.
[68]Thorpe, *African Traditional Religions*, 111.
[69]For a more detailed view on Nelson Mandela's relationship to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and the influence that this had on his social, political and theological views, please see Forster, "Mandela and the Methodists," 87–115; Cruywagen, *The Spiritual Mandela*. Mandela recalled with fondness, his relationship to the Methodist Church saying that,

> [t]he values I was taught at these [Methodist] institutions have served me well throughout my life. These values were strengthened during our years of incarceration when this church, along with other religious communities, cared for us. Not only did you send chaplains to encourage us, but you also assisted us materially within your means. You helped our families at a time when we could not help them ourselves. Mandela, "Address by President Nelson Mandela at the First Triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of South Africa"

[70]Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 542.

never extinguished."[71] Elsewhere, Mandela expressed this concept of true humanity as, "that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings."[72]

The intention of Mandela's statement is to advocate for an ethical response to our ontological reality. This arises because we share one another's humanity. We are not only to recognise it, but also to work towards re-humanizing others, and in turn, also re-humanizing ourselves. He stated this expectation more directly when he said, "I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."[73] He continues, "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."[74] This perspective can be related to a central emphasis of Christian Humanism[75] in an African sense. The South African theologian John de Gruchy says, "Christian humanism affirms the dignity of all persons as bearers of the image of God, and as such it emphasises shared responsibility for all humanity".[76] He emphasises, as Mandela does, that Christian Humanism, in an African sense, moves from the ontological recognition of shared humanity (a theological conviction) to the expectation of justice for the other (an ethical imperative).[77]

This African Christian Humanist imperative bears a great deal of coherence with Wesley's intention for Christian Perfection as a form of social holiness (as explained earlier). According to Lowery, "Wesley saw Christian Perfection as the means to fulfilling the moral demands of the gospel. Love for God and for others not only qualifies our acts by making them truly moral, it also provides the motivation that is necessary for keeping the moral law".[78] Thus, true humanity, true Christianity, indeed true "religion" (as Wesley would say), not only recognises the dignity of the other, it finds expression and perfection in working for the dignity and rights of all humanity. De Gruchy captures this beautifully in saying, "Christian humanism understands that one cannot truly love God without loving all human beings (including the self)[79], since all persons are created by God".[80] It also supports Zimmermann's affirmation that the concept of religious, or Christian, humanism leads to "a profound sense of human dignity, solidarity, and freedom based on a reasonable faith".[81]

[71]Mandela, 542.
[72]Mandela in Maanga, "The Relevance and Legacy of Nelson Mandela in the Twenty-First Century Africa: An Historical and Theological Perspective," 101.
[73]Mandela, *Notes to the Future*, 44.
[74]Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 617.
[75]De Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*, 30–32; De Gruchy, "Transforming Traditions," 139–41.
[76]See also De Gruchy, *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, 14, 57–66.
[77]The well-known Methodist ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, suggests that Methodist theological ethics should be understood as a form of "practical divinity", in other words "theology [belief] is never an end in itself but should serve the interest of transformed living [ethics]", Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian*, 255.
[78]Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley's Agenda*, 17.
[79]See Wainwright's argument that salvation as a spiritual and a social reality involves journeying towards Perfection, even human wholeness. Wainwright notes Wesley's fondness for quoting the Augustinian axiom, "He who made us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves" (*Qui fecit sine nobis, non salvabit no sine nobis*), Wainwright, *Geoffrey Wainwright on Wesley and Calvin*, 18–20. Wesley quoted this sentence in sermon 63 'The general spread of the Gospel', 1783; and in sermon 85 'On working out our own salvation', 1785 – see Wesley and Jackson, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, 281, 513 volume VI.
[80]See also De Gruchy, *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, 14, 57–66.
[81]Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*, 87.

Thus, in summary, across the world, but particularly in Africa, there is a resurgence of interest in humanism in general, and Christian humanism in particular, because of the observed need for transcendent meaning and the recapturing of shared moral values that express human solidarity for the common good. There is a loss confidence in Western individualism and the emptiness of the commodification of persons and creation.

In relation to the Southern African Methodist expression of Christian Perfection, one can see how the social location (i.e. Southern Africa in relation to colonialism and apartheid) and social identity (i.e. African intersubjective ontology) of predominantly Black Methodists informed and shaped the Wesleyan notion of Christian Perfection as a form of African Christian Humanism. In particular, one can see resonances with the deep commitment to the dignity of the human person, the re-humanisation of society, and the commitment to justice and transformation that is understood as working towards Christian Perfection by South African Methodists.[82]

Conclusion

This article has argued that Southern African Methodist theology, which is rooted in a Southern African social identity, and the social contexts of struggling against colonialism and apartheid, gave rise to a particularly African Wesleyan theology. This theology has its roots in early Wesleyan understandings of the relationship between piety and social justice – as expressed in John Wesley's notion of Christian Perfection. However, as it was planted in "African soil" and "nurtured by African nutrients"[83] it emphasised the necessity of the re-humanisation of the human person. The paper argued that humanism, which has its roots in Christian theological and social ethics, became distinctively African through the work and witness of Southern African Methodists.[84] The consequence of which is that in Southern African Methodism, Christian Perfection came to find expression as a form of African Christian humanism. Perhaps, as Biko suggests, this rediscovery of African relational humanism may be "the special contribution to the world by Africa".[85] Indeed, understanding Christian Perfection as a form of African Christian Humanism, may offer opportunities for "Revival, Revolution and Reform" in global Methodism, Wesleyan theology, and Wesleyan ethics.

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[82]For examples, please see Forster, "God's Kingdom and the Transformation of Society," 73–88; Forster, "Prophetic Witness and Social Action as Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's Mission," 411–33; Mtshiselwa, "The Emergence of the Black Methodist Consultation and its Possible Prophetic Voice in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 1–9; Bentley, "Methodism and Transformation in South Africa," 1–8.

[83]Olivier in, Richardson and Malinga, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa: Themes from John Wesley for Southern Africa*, 5.

[84]This is particularly evident in the work and witness of Southern African Methodists such as Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela, Sefako Makgatho, Seth Mokitimi, Abel Hendriks, Peter Storey and Purity Malinga (among others). See, Forster, "Mandela and the Methodists," 87–115; Mtshiselwa, "The Emergence of the Black Methodist Consultation and its Possible Prophetic Voice in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 1–9; Mtshiselwa, "Two Hundred Years of Methodism! A Black Theological Inquiry into the Heritage of Methodism in Southern Africa 1816–2016," 102–20; Millard, "Re-Appropriating Wesley for Africa," 133–46; Kumalo and Richardson, "Seth Mokitimi and Education for Ministry: What's in a Name?," 259–74.

[85]Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 46.

Notes on contributor

Dion A. Forster is the holds two doctoral degrees. A PhD in Systematic Theology (D.Th, SA, 2006) and a second PhD in New Testament studies and Empirical Theology (Ph.D, Radboud University, Holland, 2017). He is Rated researcher with the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. He serves on the full time faculty of Stellenbosch University, as the Departmental Chair of the discipline group of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology and is also the Director of the "Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology", and as Professor in Systematic Theology and Ethics, (with a focus on Public Theology). His most recent books are entitled "*The (im)possibility of forgiveness? An empirical intercultural reading of Matthew 18.15-35*" (SUN Press, 2017) and, *Between Capital and Cathedral: Essays on Church and State relationships.* (University of South Africa Press, 2013).

ORCID

Dion A. Forster http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7292-6203

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