

## Political Consciousness in The Methodist Church of Southern Africa

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### Abstract

This article considers that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has lost its political consciousness. It seeks to argue its historical ties with the African National Congress, the South African ruling party, between 1994 and 2024, which marks 30 years of democracy. Jurgen Moltmann presents the notion of political consciousness as political theology that designates the pasture, the climate, the environment and the medium in which Christian theology should be articulated today (Moltmann, 1969, 1971, 1984). The Methodist Church in Southern Africa took a position of critical solidarity in dealing with the state. However, the relationship between the MCSA and the ANC seems more unyielding than critical. This has been evident in the different public events and some relationships between Methodist Presbyters and ANC leadership. This paper critically reflects on the historical relationship of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, presenting the political consciousness that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa apprehended before the new dawn of democracy as it dealt with Apartheid. Then, it concludes that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa should desert the past relationship with the ANC and reflect on her social holiness principles to regain political consciousness and establish a 'Prophetic Critical Distance' relationship with the ANC. The proposition that Social Holiness is a means of political consciousness requires the church to be on the side of the poor, vulnerable and marginalised.

### Introduction.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) was closely aligned with the African National Congress (ANC) during the liberation struggle against colonisation and apartheid. During that struggle, the Methodist Church was a Prophetic Ministry, and with the dawn of democracy in 1994, it took a posture of Critical Solidarity (De Gruchy, 2002). The current political environment presents a political crisis, and the church is struggling to hold the state to account while the conditions of the poor are getting worse, economic inequalities, corruption, leadership crises in the nation and failing systems of governance (Cochrane, 2013). There is a problem with proximity between the MCSA and ANC (Storey, 2018). The latter uses manipulative rhetoric, such as sharing iconic figures like Nelson Mandela (Forster, 2014), that the ANC was formed in the Methodist Church (Walshe, 1970) and had always had chaplaincy services from the MCSA (Mthembu and Mtshiselwa, 2018). Political consciousness requires that the MCSA re-evaluate the political landscape and environment to reflect on its relationship with the ANC critically. Therefore, through critical reflection on historical research on the relationship between the MCSA and ANC, the MCSA can regain its political consciousness, creating critical prophetic distance through the principle of social holiness (Forster, 2008; Bentley, 2013).

## **Historical Background**

Wesleyan Methodists arrived on Southern African shores around 1802, and the first reference was found in an issue of *The Christian Magazine or Evangelical Repository*. A letter from an unnamed mission refers to a particular John Irwin of the Royal Artillery who was converted into a group of four or five men of the other regiments who met together and are called 'Methodist' (Cragg, 2011). The arrival of Wesleyan Methodists in Southern Africa formed part of Britain's colonisation and imperialist project in Africa. It brought about political, cultural, societal, language and spiritual destruction that Africa will never recover from (Hofmeyr and Pillay, 1994). Some of these destructions came with land deposition and economic deprivation of native people. Much has been written about the church's, in particular, missionaries', role in colonisation and imperialist advancements in Southern Africa, and unfortunately, the Wesleyan Methodists were part of such projects (Majeke, 1952; Cochrane, 1987; Chidester, Tayob and Weisse, 2004). Daryl Balia, in *Black Methodist and White Supremacy in South Africa*, records that "Blacks suffered great losses of land, cattle, and population as the primary response proved a failure" (1991, p. 29). This was one of many attempts of native resistance towards the slaughter by White missionaries whose aim was precise that spreading the gospel has an imperialist agenda accompanied by violence and military attacks towards the natives. All these events led to social devastation, h political powerlessness and spiritual barrenness of the natives. The political tension has existed in the Wesley Methodist Church since then and has evolved. The rise to power of the National Party in 1948 and the introduction of Apartheid as the system of governance that was based on racial segregation made this even more complicated.

## **Gaining of Political Consciousness**

The formation of the African National Congress in 1912 was the reaction of a group of missionary-educated African-Black leaders. This was mainly a reaction to the formation of the White Only Union of South Africa and its land policies in 1909. Pixley Ka Isaka Seme, an Oxford Jesus Christ College graduate, invited chiefs, religious leaders, academics and scattered African organisations throughout the country. Some had become recognised and honoured for the 5th April 1906 Essay "The Regeneration of Africa". This Essay became a foundation of the "African Renaissance" agenda to be championed by the President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and in recent years by the former South African president Thabo Mbeki. The main goal of the 1912 Conference that Seme called was to unite the African Black voices in the struggle for land dispossession. "Those who attended were the products of the missionary education – ministers, teachers, clerks, interpreters, a few successful farmers, builders, small-scale traders, compounded managers, estate and labour agents' (Walshe, 1970).

It should be noted that some were becoming astute journalists and academics with international accolades from America and the United Kingdom, including influential people like Dr WEB Dubias, who met with Tengo Jabavu and Rev W Rubusane at the 1911 Universal Races Conference. Whilst already the founding president of the African National Congress, the philosopher and strong Christian influenced by Booker T Washington founded "Ohlange Institution. The main thing to highlight is that from the initial formation, the ANC was led and

influenced by the black elite, who were known as Amazithithi (black Middle Class); it was formed through the involvement of the clergy and the fact that the formation was in the Wesleyan Methodist Church in the Bloemfontein on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1912. The Wesleyan Methodist Church has remained in the DNA of the ANC to this day. In 2012, the ANC celebrated its 100-year Centenary, when the church building was no longer used as a place of worship. The ANC and MCSA had a joint venture to rebuy the building, rededicate it, and make it a heritage site.

Historically, since 1912, the chaplaincy of the African National Congress has always been designated to the Methodist Clergy, the first being Rev Mqoboli and the last Rev Mehana. Rev Mehana, an official of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, was recalled in 2016. This was after much concern regarding Mehana's conduct, which appeared to be compromising the church. Among other things was Mehana claiming that voting for the ANC is equivalent to voting for God. Although Rev Mehana officially stepped down as an official chaplain of the ANC, he still appears in public endorsing the ANC, in some events with a clerical stole with both the ANC and MCSA emblems and colours, which gives much public presence. However, Rev Mehana's conduct is just a replica of what occurs in the local churches where political theology occurs. The best way of clarifying this is to quote an event that dates to 1994: Nelson Mandela's visit to the Methodist Conference, which could have been the first time for a high-level politician to have addressed the highest decision-making body of the Methodist Church. This was a few months after his inauguration as the first democratic president of South Africa. He stated, "My joy at being in this conference is multiplied manifold by the fact that this is also a personal homecoming for me, both in the physical environment and spiritual sense. The environs of Umtata are not only my humble origins. It is here that my spiritual association with this great church started. And I cannot overemphasise the Methodist Church's role in my own life" (Mandela, 1994). Mandela's claim of his Methodist roots, which can also be traced during his time in prison, his relationship with Desmond Tutu, who always reminded Mandela that he was a Methodist, to his time as his presidency to his funeral, makes no doubt of his Methodist adherences. This was also exacerbated by his 'membership card', which was overemphasised in social media as Methodists prided themselves in being associated with Nelson Mandela, an international icon and statesman. Dion Forster in 'Mandela, and the Methodist: Faith, fallacy and Fact' has covered the interchange of Mandela's faith and politics at length. Both Mehana and Mandela have come to symbolise a certain political theology consciousness representing the two organisations as partners in the struggle. Looking at the history and status of this interlaced relationship, Peter Storey concludes, "There is seductiveness about proximity to power; church leaders are not exempt from its charms unless they have done their theology. My own denomination, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), is an association with so many of the liberation leaders during the struggle years, its claim on both Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe as 'sons of Methodism', and its numerical strength in the ANC stronghold of the Eastern Cape in particularly vulnerable" (2012). The question to be dealt with is whether the historical interlace and proximity of the MCSA and the ANC impact the Methodist Church's political consciousness, which is social holiness that leads to critical prophetic distance.

### **The Challenges of Political Consciousness**

Methodist Church of Southern Africa has had an ambiguous and, to some level, contradictory history of political consciousness, as noted and captured. The first point to note is that the

environment of the political sphere in South Africa is, and foremost, defined by race. The MCSA intended to be a multiracial church, which described its political position. Initially, it was designated as an English-speaking church, distinguishing it from the Afrikaans-speaking church, the Dutch Reformed Church, which was associated with Apartheid. However, the Methodist Missionary Church was part of some atrocities which came with colonisation (Cochrane, 1987; de Gruchy and de Gruchy, 2004). The political consciousness history of the Methodist Church is contested as there have been views that it is part of white supremacy, which led to the formation of a movement such as the Black Methodist Consultation (BMC). The BMC viewed Methodists as racially insensitive to issues that affected the majority of black people. "This multiracialism did not mean much at the time, either in terms of black leadership or the local congregation's life.

Nevertheless, the principle of multiracialism was established, and this potential was significant" (de Gruchy and de Gruchy, 2004). The other factor that kept the Methodist political consciousness was their commitment to social holiness. The Methodists were involved in building schools and providing good education (Bentley and Forster, 2012). As the times evolved in the South African political landscape, the Methodists held onto these two premises: multiracialism and social holiness (Forster, 2008). These two principles have been central to the Methodist political consciousness, found mainly in two critical statements and resolutions of the Methodist of Southern Africa. The first is from the 1958 Conference, "It is the will of God that the Methodist church should be one and undivided Church' and the other one is from the review of the 1981 "Obedience'81, where they pronounce that they will rebuff the state policy of segregation and that it a will of God to be integrated and therefore they choose to obey God instead of state power.

### **Methodist Political Consciousness**

The 1958 Conference stated that: "The Conference declares its conviction that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be "One and Undivided," trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition and that this be the general basis of our missionary policy". This was clearly a statement of faith, hope, and an acknowledgement of the task ahead of them. This was also a statement of prophetic stance. The apartheid government was established in 1948 with the rise of the National Party winning the elections. Already throughout colonisation and the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1909, South Africa was already a racially polarised nation with white supremacy and Black African oppression as part of the social construct.

The rise of the Methodist Church against Apartheid led to a misconception that it was always politically conscious when it came to the struggle against oppression in Southern Africa. A historical reflection of how the political consciousness of the Methodist Church has evolved during different seasons of the political landscape. The first thing to be noted is the lack of political consciousness in the Wesley Methodist Church, which resulted from the persuasion of the colonial and imperialist Victorian political agenda. This was precisely the idea of the English-Speaking Church. As the political environment evolved and continues to evolve, one needs to extract what has been the political consciousness of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. In this context, political consciousness is how theology and the church engage society to bring about equality, liberation and the common good. As Jurgen Moltmann (1971) argues: "Critical faith has achieved a reflective and free relationship with its basic traditions. But today, the church, theology, and faith must engage in asocial, political, and psychological

criticism of the Enlightenment to achieve a new state of consciousness.” and further argues that the future upon which humanity enters comes from our consciousness first through the expected standard and reciprocal inflamed threat to humankind (Moltmann, 1969, p. 30). Secondly, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has proven that there are moments when it gains consciousness and some when it loses it. In the times of colonisation, it had lost consciousness as it participated in the harsh, violent practices towards the natives. However, during the Apartheid, the Methodist Church gained consciousness where they were fighting alongside the oppressed. The third aspect to be discussed is today’s challenges.

### **Today’s Challenges**

Today, the MCSA seems to have lost consciousness again, as there is a significant concern about the church's role in post-Apartheid South Africa. Dion Forster (Forster, 2016) has published three articles that seek to interrogate the political consciousness of the Methodist Church as it relates to the ANC as the governing party. He has enquired, “*A state church? A consideration of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in the light of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ‘Theological position paper on state and Church’* (Forster, 2016), then “*A Kairos Moment for the Methodist Church of Southern Africa? Engaging Nationalism and State Theology in the Democratic South Africa*” (Forster, 2019) and “*State Theology and Political Populism? A Kairos Critique of Religious Populism in South Africa*” (Forster, 2020). In all these articles, Forster seems to note that there is a level of compromising that the MCSA is adhering towards, stating that it is essential that the MCSA be reminded, and to remind the governing ANC, that a nationalist theology and the relationship that stems from it, is not in the interest of either the church or the state. He further attests that all the churches in South Africa must remind the governing ANC and the MCSA that a populist state theology and the relationship that stems from it is not in the interest of the church, the state, or the people of South Africa. A populist state theology is an offence to the nation and the intention of God, and it jeopardises the common good of South Africans. Let the church return to its prophetic calling, serving God and God’s interests for the good of the people, not the aims of the state (Forster, 2020). In dealing with the ambiguity of the MCSA’s role and relationship and how to deal with the current socio-political issues that address the challenges that Storey and Forster are raising, I seek to propose that the MCSA should be resolute on their principles of social holiness as a means of political consciousness.

### **Social Holiness as Means of Political Consciousness**

Methodists were raised to reform the nation, particularly the church, and spread scriptural holiness over the land. Generations of people called Methodists have used the idea of social holiness, which is associated with Wesleyan Theology, to generate awareness of suffering, profess to seek justice, equality, and holistic salvation, and engage in political activism. I draw on three arguments that present social holiness as a means of political consciousness as they relate to the Methodist Church in Southern Africa. The first is social holiness, which relates to **forming political views**, followed by **social holiness as a means of social cohesion** and **promoting empathy and compassion**.

### **Social Holiness and formation of theological and political views**

Social holiness should give courage to speak truth to power. The challenge in the current relationship between the MCSA and ANC compromises this ability. MCSA, through friendships such as Mandela’s and providing chaplaincies to the ANC, compromised this ability through a

lack of formidable political views. Kusmiere and Cochrane (2013) have argued that during the political transition in South Africa, the church 'outsourced' its political conversion and political opinions to politicians. Various issues caused this; among them was the co-option of some church leaders to the state and general cosy relationships between the church and state, particularly the ANC, which became a prominent role player in the dawn of democracy. 'In the first years after the political change, it became clear that an adequate (theological) response to the new post-Apartheid context could neither simply be derived from the richness of previous experiences and reflections, nor readily elaborated anew" (Cochrane, 2013, pp. 65–66). Critical Solidarity's position proved inadequate, as Allan Boesak stated that the church couldn't afford to be in solidarity with power (Boesak, 2005). Social holiness as a means of forming theological and political views will expose that any proximity with the ANC will be a political choice of the powerful instead of the pro-poor and marginalised.

### **Social Cohesion**

One of the most significant challenges South Africa faces today is social polarisation and division on matters of race, tribalism, gender, inequalities, and classism. Field(2015) has stated that in social holiness, a Methodist principle (political consciousness) shall advocate for justice, mercy, and truth in solidarity with the excluded through deliberate spiritual formation and activism. The wholistic salvation, the whole gospel for the entire person in the whole community, and political theology are sensitive to time and culture and seek to generate awareness of the suffering of others and profess to seek justice. Reference to social justice did not cut deep enough to address the causes of poverty, rather addressing structural injustices from capitalism and imperialism in society as sinful and needed to be changed. Working for a 'better deal' within the existing framework of structural inequality could not be enough. In the case of Social Holiness, commitment to the poor means more than theorising about poverty; it also calls for an encounter. Social holiness is the meeting of the theological and practical response to the needs of society. Sanctification is that salvation involves the transformation of the human condition, communities, and all spheres of human life. Social holiness is the practical expression of sanctification. The MCSA fell into the trap of self-congratulations as it had worked with the liberation movements and thought life post-apartheid would be the same. Without socio-critical analysis of issues such as power dynamics, solidarity frames, and relevance of prophetic messages, the relationship between MCSA and ANC becomes too friendly, with the former neglecting its social responsibility.

### **They are promoting empathy and compassion.**

Social holiness is critical for caring ministry and supporting the vulnerable. The relationship between the MCSA and ANC has led to the misidentification of people who require empathy and compassion. This is evident in political rallies and when these politicians attend church services. They arrive in big luxury cars, wearing expensive labels and displaying opulence in the face of outrageous poverty. When they arrive at church services, they occupy high tables, and it is the same with presbyters when they attend political and state functions, leading to utter disregard for the poor (Uchem, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between the MCSA and ANC has evolved from the times of Apartheid, where they fought side by side. In the 20th century, many prominent members of the African

National Congress held leadership positions in the Methodist Church, including Nelson Mandela. The Methodist Church played a significant role in the fight against apartheid in South Africa, with many clergy and members actively participating in the resistance movement. Post-apartheid, the Methodist Church has continued to be involved in South Africa's political landscape, with some criticism for being too close to the ruling party (ANC). Allan Boesak criticised the principle of critical solidarity based on the argument that the church can't be in solidarity with power; rather, it should be in solidarity with the poor and downtrodden (Boesak, 2005).

There is a need for a fresh and rethought approach to this relationship, considering that the ANC is now a political party in power. The MCSA should be aware that it conveys that they are on the side of the powerful and condones the ANC's political shenanigans and its failures. Critical policy must be considered a guiding principle in engaging politics in a democracy. This has led the Methodist Church to lose its authenticity as a church on the side of the poor and an advocate for social justice (Forster, 2008). Regarding its political consciousness and political theology, the Methodist Church can create a critical prophetic distance from the ANC and regain its authenticity and advocacy for the poor and social justice. The Church's theology, influencing its political stance, emphasises social justice and equality (Bentley, 2013). The church should go back to its roots of political consciousness that seek to serve the poor and promote social justice, which will help the church to be prophetic and challenge those in power instead of being closely allied with them. Through social holiness as its political consciousness, the Methodist Church has grappled with issues like ethnicity, racial justice, and the relationship between faith and politics throughout its history in South Africa. It should create a 'Prophetic Critical Distance' instead of 'Critical Solidarity'.

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