

# Democracy, Vulnerability, and Resilience, in Post-Apartheid South Africa Theological and Ethical Challenges

## 1. Democracy

Almost 23 years ago, in his prophetic reflection on *Christianity and Democracy*, John De Gruchy lamented that ‘the sorry tale of failed political orders in Africa, particularly Southern Africa, since independence, indicates that systems of government, whether liberal democratic, socialist, or Marxist-Leninist, foisted on the people of Africa, cannot be expected to work. Democracy has to grow from within in ways appropriate to Africa and each nation’s particular history and political tradition.’<sup>1</sup> To take democracy as a socio-political value that epitomizes the ideal of a free and equal society may be easy to understand but to define democracy in terms of its practice, realism, and provisions is more complex and difficult to ascertain, since the end side of democracy is the level at which the concept of democracy is widely difficult to apprehend not only in Africa but in many parts of the Third World nations. For De Gruchy, the emergence of democracy as understood in the west, always reflected local traditions and practice; hence Africa cannot be an exception. Endorsing Kwame Appiah’s position that ‘Africa will only solve its problems if they are seen as human problems arising out of an African context,’<sup>2</sup> De Gruchy insists that ‘while attempts by western nations to prescribe democratic solutions for Africa have to be considered seriously, they also have to be treated with critical caution.’<sup>3</sup> To struggle for freedom is one thing but to build a democratic society is another thing. Political challenges besetting post-liberation governments in Africa, particularly in Southern Africa, as they try to build democratic states that are resonant to the needs and aspirations of their people, while trying to reflect local traditions without displacing the mainstream political thought as found in the west, are a result of much deeper socio-political problems than one of transition. For D Gruchy democracy to be authentic should reflect local needs and interests.

## 1. Vulnerability

After 20 years of democracy, current challenges besetting South Africa today seem to suggest that to build a new nation out of the ruins of the old political order without its meaningful transformation or integration into the new, is impossible. It is like trying to ‘pour new wine into old wineskins’ while avoiding breaking the old wineskins. In the process new challenges are encountered than those experienced in the struggle for freedom. Avoiding or facing these challenges head-on may both be an occasion for blessing or curse. The vulnerability of South Africa’s democratic dispensation is not unique to South Africa but a reminder of how true democracy works. Records show that ‘democracies have by no means been immune to the tides of history; they have collapsed from political failure, succumbed to internal division.... But democracies have also demonstrated remarkable resiliency over time and have shown that, with the commitment and informed dedication of their citizens, they can overcome severe economic hardship, reconcile social and ethnic division, and, when necessary, prevail in time of national unrest.’<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Resilience

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<sup>1</sup> De Gruchy, John, W.: *Christianity and Democracy*. David Philip, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1995, p. 188

<sup>2</sup> De Gruchy, John, W quoting Appiah, Kwame: In *My Father’s House*, p. 220.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., 1995, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> <https://web-archive-2017.ait.org.tw/infousa/zhtw/DOCS/whatsdem/whatdm2.htm>

The strength and resilience of South Africa's democracy lies in its vulnerability. It is the power and authority that democracy offers most frequently to its critics that give it resiliency. The processes of debate, dissent, and compromise that some point to as weaknesses are, in fact, democracy's underlying strength. Certainly, no one has ever accused democracies of being particularly efficient in their deliberations: Democratic decision-making in a large, complex society can be a messy, gruelling, and time-consuming process. But in the end, a government resting upon the consent of the governed can speak and act with a confidence and authority than the opposite. A democratic society is not only a set of constitutional provisions and procedures regulating how a government ought to function and discharge its duties in society but also ballot a sensitive resolve towards national coexistence based on the will and aspirations of the people where the ideal of 'majority rule' and 'minority rights' take centre stage. This position endorses the view of the late American philosopher, Marion Young, who argues that 'when making a moral position we are always captives of our own social context in order to understand what justice means, we need to take into account the perspective of the oppressed and their sad stories of injustice.'<sup>5</sup>

### **3. The South African Story as a Cradle of Resilience**

Bishop Garth Counsel, at his last homily, at the Oil Mass, on Maundy Thursday, at St Cyprian's Church in Langa, reminded us of what the former US President, Baraka Obama, had said during his visit to South Africa. President Obama urged South Africans to remember in order to hope again: 'The people of South Africa', said President Obama, 'must never forget their history, they need to, always, remember their past in order to hope again. The people of South Africa should never forget of its past in order to build a solid future.' The story of apartheid should always disturb the consciousness of the people of South Africa, in order for them to remain resolute in their commitment to the struggles for a non-racial and reconciled South Africa. To remember is to build a nation in its common spirit. It is in remembering that we derive the power to believe. So, as Christians, we are called to remember again and again, in order to believe. In fact, we meet every Sunday in order to remember, to remember in order to have confidence in the certainty of Christian discipleship. We remember in order to become members of the body of Christ again. Current events in Southern Africa, particularly in our country South Africa, is a reminder of how heavy the cross of democracy is. It reminds us that to know what democracy is, is one thing but to understand what it means to live in a democratic society is another question, even more difficult to answer. The wounds of our divided past make it impossible and unbearable for many South Africans to see the new dawn. The dark cloud of apartheid still hovers the South African sky and this cloud make it difficult to see the mirage of democracy laying ahead. As nation the people of South Africa are united by the history of pain. The strength of South Africa democracy should be found in the South African people's common story of suffering and pain. It is when the people cease to remember that the bolts of democracy begin to crack. The South African story is a cradle of resilience

### **4. Individual freedom as a social commitment**

The Indian philosopher Amartya Sen in his book *Development as Freedom* shares a thrilling but breath-taking story about Bertrand Russel, who was a firm atheist, who was once asked what he would do if, following his death, he was to encounter God after all. Russel is supposed to have answered, *I will ask him God Almighty, why you gave little evidence of your existence*. Certainly, according to Amartya, the appalling world in which we live does not 'at

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<sup>5</sup> Young Iris, Marion: *Justice and the politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990, pp. 37ff

least on the surface look like one in which an all-powerful benevolence is having its way. According to him, it is hard to understand how a compassionate world order can include so many people afflicted by acute misery, persistent hunger and deprived and desperate lives, and why millions of innocent children must die each year from lack of food or medical attention or social care. For Sen, the issue of cause is not new, it has been a subject of some discussion among theologians. The argument that God has reason to want us to deal with these matters ourselves has had considerable support. But as a nonreligious person himself, he is unable to assess the theological merits of this argument. But he can appreciate the force of the claim that people themselves must have responsibility for the development and change of the world in which they live. For Sen, as people who live 'in a broad sense together we cannot escape the thought that the terrible occurrences that we see around us are quintessentially our problem. They are our responsibility whether they are also anyone else's.<sup>6</sup>

It is not out of the ordinary that Amartya Sen uses Bertrand Russel's anguish to make a real point that expresses our own social quagmire in a real world. He speaks of God's invisibility and God's little evidence. Likewise, I would also say that the appalling circumstances in which we live in a post-Apartheid South Africa does not seem to be under the guidance of a democratically free society in which the rule of law and individual responsibility prevail. The presence of democracy is invisible and vulnerable. It does not make sense that young lives may be taken in public spaces within institutions which could protect and make them safe. Amartya Sen's position reveals one of the most intricate theological and ethical challenges facing the Church after 20 years of our democratic transition. Uyenene's tragic passing in a public office only reveals how unsafe and vulnerable our democratic institutions are. As a nation we have been befallen by a tragedy that will take a long, long time to heal if it will ever heal. It shows that South Africa has not been able to deal with its divided past in a way that heals and reconciles. It has not effectively dealt with its bleeding wounds. The bleeding wounds of our democracy render God's existence invisible. Immediately after 1994, the world has been unfair to South Africa by demanding more than what South Africa could afford, without giving it any possible space for it to sit and reflect on its own wounds. South Africa's urgency in responding to international pressures and making of itself a perfectly democratic country has not given time to South Africa to dress its own wounds.

As a church, in the past two Sundays we have been reminded about the cost and terms of discipleship (Luke 14: 25-35) and the needs to relinquish our privileges when necessary in favour of the poor and the lost as the parable of the lost sheep implies (Luke 15:1-10). The parable of the lost sheep shows how the strength of democracy based on the rule of the majority and minorities rights could be made more effective when the rights of minorities and the interest of the poor are part of the national agenda. In the light of current events in our country we could use the present scripture to see if Jesus is not talking to me an you to sit and reflect whether following the dawn of democracy in 1994 we have set down to reflect and engage with the cost of democracy or the cost of living in a new nation as it were. Yes, we have achieved our freedom and democracy but we remained the same people who had have a very difficult past, who had been severely wounded by the apartheid system. After 1994 we took for granted that the building of a nation is costly and we have not realised that without addressing the wounds we have will not be able to build a nation so effectively.

Freedom and democracy are often used interchangeably, but the two are not synonymous: Democracy is indeed a set of ideas and principles about freedom, but it also consists of a set

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<sup>6</sup> Sen, *Amartya Development as Freedom* Anchor Books New York 1999, p 282

of practices and procedures that have been moulded through a long, often tortuous history. In short, democracy is the institutionalization of freedom. For this reason, it is possible to identify the time-tested fundamentals of constitutional government, human rights, and equality before the law that any society must possess to be properly called democratic.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, we laid the foundations, the foundations of democracy, the rule of law, the culture of constitutionalism and human rights, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but we have not realised that as wounded as we are, we may not be able to take our journey to the end as easily we could. We have dressed the wounds, but we seem to have placed the bandage just over the bleeding wounds which were not properly dressed which are now beginning to show up in many different ways. We took for granted that we have achieved our freedom but we did not reflect so soberly what to do with our freedom. This articulates Marion Young's epistemological privilege in favour of the oppressed when arguing that 'when making a moral position we are always captives of our own social context in order to understand what justice means, we need to take into account the perspective of the oppressed and their sad stories of injustice.'<sup>8</sup>

- **The Revd Dr Isaias Chachine**  
**UCT Chaplain**

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<sup>7</sup><https://web-archive-2017.ait.org.tw/infousa/zhtw/DOCS/whatsdem/whatdm2.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Young Iris, Marion: *Justice and the politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990, pp. 37ff