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'Democracy is coming to the RSA': On democracy, theology, and futural historicity

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This article brings the concept of democracy – as an open-ended tradition – in conversation with notions dealing with historicity and the future, such as 'democracy to come', 'promise', and 'a democratic vision'. It is argued that although these notions are rightfully associated with the future, they also imply that democracy should not be disconnected from an emphasis on an inheritance from the past. With this emphasis in mind, the first part of the article attends to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's intriguing term, 'democracy to come', whereas the second part of the article takes a closer look at some aspects of the work of the South African theologian John de Gruchy on democracy, with special reference to his distinction between a democratic *system* and a democratic *vision*. The third, and final, part of the article brings some of the insights taken from the engagement with Derrida and De Gruchy into conversation with the continuing challenges facing theological discourse on democracy in South Africa today.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: A constructive proposal is made that emphasises the futural openness of democracy in a way that challenges a vague utopianism.

The coming of democracy

The title of this article is a reference to the Canadian songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen's song, 'Democracy' (from his album *The Future*). Each stanza ends with the words 'Democracy is coming to the USA'. Although the album was only released in 1992, Cohen often alluded to the fact that the song developed around the time of the fall of the Berlin wall, a time when there were high hopes for a new world order of peace and justice. In an interview conducted in 1993 (Bob Harriss Show 1993) Cohen commented further:

> So while Eastern Europe was liberating itself, and the wall was coming down … I said to myself: 'Is democracy really coming to the East?' And I had to answer truthfully 'No, I don't think it is!' And then I had to ask myself 'Where is democracy coming? What is democracy' … (A)nd that's when I came upon the line 'Democracy is coming the USA' which of course has an irony 'What do you meant to say, that it is not there already?' Well no. It isn't really there already, it is the ideal, it is the fate.[1] (n.p.)

The time that Cohen was working on this song was of course also the time in which a radical political transition in South Africa was taking place. The country was on the bumpy road to its first truly democratic elections in 1994, and during this time the concept of democracy was widely discussed. Looking back one can ask whether there was enough of a theological engagement with the notion of democracy during that time. One should recall, though, some projects and publications, such as the booklet *Die keuse vir 'n inklusiewe demokrasie: 'n teologies-eties studie oor toepaslike gemeenskapswaardes* by Lategan *et al*., published by the Centre for Hermeneutics in Stellenbosch (1987),[2] the collection *A Democratic Vision for South Africa* edited by Klaus Nürnberger (1990), and John de Gruchy's book *Christianity and Democracy* (1995), which was completed around the time that Nelson Mandela was inaugurated in May 1994 as South Africa's democratically elected president.

In 2014 we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the coming of democracy to Republic of South Africa (RSA). This anniversary indeed provides the opportunity to look back at the last two decades, as well as to reflect upon the state of democracy in South Africa. The celebration of 20 years of democracy in South Africa also calls for sustained theological and ethical reflection. In this article I would like to focus not so much on the coming of democracy to South Africa, or on

1. Interview with Leonard Cohen on the 'Bob Harriss Show' (see Bob Harriss Show 1993). Cohen adds to this comment: 'But if it's coming to any place, its coming to America first, the cradle of the best and the worst'.

2. For a further development of the project, see Kinghorn (1990).

Note: This article was read as a paper at a conference of the Theological Society of South Africa (TSSA), on the theme 'Citizens or Subjects: Theological and ethical reflections on participatory democracy in South Africa', held in Potchefstroom, 18–20 June 2014.

the current state of our political dispensation, or on the future of democracy in South Africa. Rather, I want to offer some reflections that relate the concept of democracy[3] – as an open-ended tradition – to notions dealing with historicity and the future, such as 'democracy to come', 'promise', and 'a democratic vision'. I will argue that although these notions are rightfully associated with the future, they also imply that democracy should not be disconnected from an emphasis on an inheritance from the past.

With this emphasis in mind, the first part of the article attends to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's intriguing term 'democracy to come', drawing mainly but not exclusively on his text 'The Reason of the Strongest (Are There Rogue States?)' in his book *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005).[4] The second part of the article takes a closer look at some aspects of the work of the South African theologian John de Gruchy on democracy. Special attention is given to De Gruchy's distinction between a democratic *system* and a democratic *vision*. Although Derrida and De Gruchy's writings on democracy originate from different social locations, are conducted in different genres, and are situated in different theoretical discourses, they do share – amidst differences – the emphasis on the open-endedness of democracy. One could speak in this regard of democracy's futural historicity. The third, and final, part of the article brings some of the insights taken from the engagement with Derrida and De Gruchy into conversation with the continuing challenges facing theological discourse on democracy in South Africa today.

'Democracy to Come' (Jacques Derrida)

Although one can argue that politics is never absent from Derrida's work, and one should acknowledge the fact that Derrida often resisted the idea that there came a political and ethical turn in his thinking, it is true that there is a more explicit focus on politics (and ethics) in his later work. One key political idea that emerges in his later work is the thought-provoking concept 'democracy to come' (*la démocratie à venir*). He developed this concept in a number of works and interviews from the early 1990s onwards, including *Spectres of Marx* (1994; a book dedicated to Chris Hani), *The Politics of Friendship* (1997), and most extensively in his essay 'The Reason of the Strongest' (included in his book *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, the last book published during his lifetime). In this essay – first presented at a conference at Cerisy in 2002,[5] in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 – Derrida acknowledges that the strange syntagma 'democracy to come' is an expression in which he often sought a sort of refuge (Derrida 2005:8). But what does this enigmatic phrase mean?

On one level one can say that there is for Derrida an indeterminacy and open-endedness to democracy, as the verb 'to come' indicates. The phrase 'democracy to come' implies, as Matthias Fritsch (2002:577) has argued, 'a link between democracy and the promise of a future to come, an unownable and unknowable future'. The futural aspect of the 'to come' suggest not merely that democracy is coming in the future, but also that in some way the future is coming to democracy. Derrida often distinguishes between 'le futur' and 'l'avenir'. Whereas the first term refers to the future time that is in a sense predictable and foreseeable, 'l'avenir' ('à venir'; the futural 'to come') points to an unpredictable and unexpected event that can interrupt and transform, and hence also holds a certain promise.[6]

The phrase 'democracy to come' thus points for Derrida to the fact that democracy is not some stable and fixed concept or tradition, but that it is continually open to change and transformation. Within democracy there is an inherent instability, plasticity, and drive to perfectibility (or pervertibility).[7] Democracy is always in the process of striving to become (more) democratic. In order to illuminate Derrida's use of the concept 'democracy to come', it is furthermore necessary to acknowledge the close interrelation between this term and another intriguing concept that plays a pivotal role in Derrida's later theology, namely the idea of 'autoimmunity'.[8] Autoimmunity – a term taken from biology – can be described as the process in which an entity attacks its own defences in order to defend itself. In a dialogue with Giovanna Borradori, Derrida gives the following succinct description: '(A)n autoimmunitary process is the strange behaviour where a

3. The concept 'democracy' is undoubtedly a thorny and elusive concept, as is seen in the wide variety of ways it is defined and understood. Giorgio Agamben states in his 'Introductory Notes on the Concept of Democracy' in Agamben *et al*. (2012:1) that democracy can mean one of two different things: 'a way of constituting the body politic (in which case we are talking about public law) or a technique of governing (in which case our horizon is that of administrative practice). To put it another way, democracy designates both the form through which power is legitimated and the manner in which it is exercised'. I think it is important, following Agamben, not the limited our understanding of democracy to the former (a technique of governing), but to keep both these aspects in mind in our reflections when we engage with the question what we are speaking of we speak of 'democracy', albeit it that it is surely important to engage critically and constructively too with the manner in which power is exercised. In everyday parlance democracy is most often seen, to use Abraham Lincoln's phrase, as government 'of the people, by the people, for the people' (cf. Nürnberger 1990:9). This definition raises of course further questions. The South African theologian Klaus Nürnberger has helpfully indicated that for a system to be truly democratic (at least in the liberal democratic sense) it is not enough for leaders to rule with the consent of, on behalf of, in the interest of, in consultation with, and in participation with the people, since a benevolence dictator could also apply these conditions. Although these are necessary conditions they are not sufficient, since for a truly democratic system the strength of the mandate given by the people is important, as is the need for regular and secret elections on the basis of one vote per adult person out of free choice on the basis of full and free information (Nürnberger 1990:11). Although it is certainly necessary to have conceptual clarity regarding the concept of democracy, it is a temptation to view it in static way. Part of the argument of this article, through its engagement with notions such as 'democracy to come' and 'democratic vision', is to challenge the way in which the notion of democracy is often used in a fixed and de-historicized way.

4. This work was originally published in French under the title *Voyous* (2003).

5. For more background information about this conference and Derrida's role, see Peeters (2013:515–517).

6. In a documentary on Derrida's life (*Derrida*, 2002, directed by Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick), Derrida comments as follows, 'In general, I try and distinguish between what one calls the future and *l'avenir* [the 'to come']. The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There is a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l'avenir* (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future, beyond the other known future, it is *l'avenir* in that it is the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival'.

7. Although one can describe Derrida as a friend of democracy, he does draw attention to the aporetic character of democracy and the dangers contained within it. Cf. Patton (2007:767).

8. Derrida began using the concept of 'autoimmunity' in the mid-1990s. See in this regard his important essay 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone' (first published in French in 1996 and in English in 1998) in Derrida (2002).

living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, *itself* works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its "own" immunity' (Borradori 2003:94).

In 'The Reason of the Strongest' Derrida illustrates the term 'autoimmunity' with reference to a couple of examples. The first example is taken from post-colonial Algeria where the democratic electoral process of 1992 was interrupted because of fears that it could result in the formation of a fundamentalist Islamist government, which might have introduced antidemocratic laws. If so, then it would have been an example where democracy democratically served the move to an antidemocratic regime. This possibility is real for all democracies, Derrida (2005:31) argues, because 'the *alternative to* democracy can always be *represented* as a democratic *alternative*'. The Algerian example to suspend provisionally the elections in sovereign fashion is for Derrida typical of all assaults on democracy that takes place in the name of democracy, seemingly for democracy's own good.

Derrida's second example of autoimmunity at work in democratic processes invokes the attacks of 11 September 2001. Derrida comments on the fact that the largely democratic culture and law system of the United States makes the country relatively open to others, including to the suicidal pilots that were trained on American soil (Derrida 2005:40). The threat to democracy experienced in the aftermath of 9/11, Derrida argues, resulted in the fact that democracy attacks part of itself, restricting in the process some democratic freedoms and rights, and transferring unchecked power to security police and the surveillance apparatus of the state.[9]

For Derrida, democracy is, furthermore, not merely autoimmune in the sense that it turns against itself and its own inherent values of freedom and openness in the light of real or perceived threats, but also that it turns against itself through constantly putting itself into question. Inherent in democracy is a form of self-critique that is linked to the fact that democracy seeks perfecting itself. Derrida (2005) writes:

> The expression 'democracy to come' takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility. Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name. Including the idea of the constitutional paradigm, and the absolute authority of law. It is thus the only paradigm that is universalizable, whence its chance and its fragility. (pp. 86–87)

One can thus say that autoimmunity does not only involve, as Samir Haddad (2013:60) has rightly pointed out, the occurrence of what is often viewed as antidemocratic measures, but also accounts for what is regarded by many as pro-democratic. These pro-democratic accounts of self-critique and openness underline an attitude of hospitality within democracy that makes democracy vulnerable. The infinite perfectibility of democracy thus brings with it danger and risk. Yet, to speak of democracy to come is to inscribe within democracy the promise of an open future associated with radical hospitality.

It falls beyond the scope of this article to give a detailed description of Derrida's complex discussion of the notion 'democracy to come' but suffice to say that for Derrida democracy to come indicates a promise of infinite perfectibility that implies a continuing critique of the way democracy is formalised and institutionalised. Ideas like freedom and equality are inscribed as promise within democracy. This promise is inscribed within history (with democracy thus being a political dispensation open to its own historicity), opening up an endless process of transformation.

What are the implications of Derrida's concept of 'democracy to come'? A possible answer to this question relates to the fact that it challenges any lazy equation of democracy with a specific regime or practice, and continually calls for an interruptive and transformative engagement with democracy in the here and the now. As Derrida (2005) puts it:

> The expression 'democracy to come' does indeed translate or call for a militant and interminable political critique. A weapon aimed at the enemies of democracy, it protests against all naïveté and every political abuse, every rhetoric that would present as a present or existing democracy, as a de facto democracy, what remains inadequate to the democratic demand, whether nearby of far away, at home or somewhere else in the world, anywhere that a discourse on human rights and on democracy remains little more than an obscene alibi so long as it tolerates the terrible plight of so many millions of human beings suffering from malnutrition, disease, and humiliation, grossly deprived not only of bread and water but of equality and freedom, dispossessed of the rights of all, of everyone, of anyone. (p. 86)

The ethical and political thrust of Derrida's understanding of 'democracy to come' is clear in the above quotation, and throughout his writings Derrida emphasises the way in which 'democracy to come' is inextricably linked to justice.[10]

Moreover, democracy is for Derrida radically historical yet is always coming. As he writes (Derrida 1997) towards the end of his book *Politics of Friendship*:

> For democracy remains to come; this is the essence in so far as it remains indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept. (p. 306)

The fact that 'democracy to come' hesitates endlessly does not mean for Derrida that it merely offers a neutral

9. In Derrida's words: '(W)e see an American administration, potentially followed by others in Europe and the rest of the world, claiming that in the war it is waging against the *axis of evil*, against the enemies of freedom and the assassins of democracy throughout the world, it must restrict within its own country certain so-called democratic freedoms and the exercise of certain rights by, for example, increasing the powers of police investigation and interrogations, without anyone, any democrat, being really able to oppose such measures' (Derrida 2005:40).

10. Cf. Derrida (2005:88). Here Derrida points to the conjunction between democracy and justice in his work, *Specters of Marx* and *Politics of Friendship*.

conceptual analysis or leads to paralysis; rather, it also attempts to win support and adherence, it seeks performativity. 'The *to* of the *to come* wavers between imperative injuction (the call to performance) and the patient *perhaps* of messianicity' (Derrida 2005:88).[11] 'Democracy to come' indicates that we do not know what democracy is, that we should be careful to identify it with any political regime, that it is (always) to come, and at the same time that the openness to this futural 'to come' has transformative potential; it promises an event, a change of heart, within history, within the here and the now.

A democratic vision (John de Gruchy)

In the second part of the article, I want to draw attention to the work of the South African theologian John de Gruchy who has engaged extensively from a theological perspective with the notion of democracy since the early 1990s, the period of transition to democracy in South Africa. For De Gruchy – as for Derrida – democracy is an open-ended tradition that is in need of constant interruption and transformation in the concrete here and now in light of a future vision or vision of the future.

In his book *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order* (1995), De Gruchy (1995) makes a helpful distinction between the democratic *system* and the democratic *vision*. He explains:

> By democratic *system* we mean those constitutional principles and procedures, symbols and convictions, which have developed over the centuries and which have become an essential part of any genuine democracy whatever its precise historical form. When we speak about a democratic *vision* we refer to that hope for a society in which all people are truly equal and yet where difference is respected; a society in which all people are truly free, but where social responsibility rather than individual self-interest prevails; and a society which is truly just, and therefore one in which the vast gulf between rich and poor has been overcome. (p. 7)

This distinction implies, among other things, that a democratic system is birthed and sustained by a democratic vision, and that a democratic system is in constant need to ask the question whether it adequately gives form to a democratic vision.[12] What exactly such a democratic vision entails is, however, in itself often highly contested, albeit that there is often also some form of consensus about the values that are associated with such a vision. De Gruchy links the democratic vision to the hope for a society in which there is true equality, true freedom, and true justice. Moreover, it is an equality that respects differences, a freedom that is linked to social responsibility, and it is a justice which seeks to overcome economic inequality (De Gruchy 1995:7). Or as he put it elsewhere:

> If we regard democracy simply as a system of governance, we fail to appreciate its character as an open-ended process that is ever seeking to become more inclusive, more just, and more global in response to the needs and hopes of society. (De Gruchy 2004:441)

In the previous section, I referred to the specific way in which Derrida emphasises the open-endedness or open future of democracy. De Gruchy too views democracy as an open-ended tradition: 'Like all living traditions, democracy is a *narrative of an argument* which is open to change and development, retrieval, and renewal' (De Gruchy 1995:15, 16). He quotes approvingly John Dewey's remark that the task of democracy 'is one that can have no end, the task of democracy is forever that of the creation of a freer and more human experience in which all share and to which all contribute' (De Gruchy 1995:39). And, adds De Gruchy: 'That is the democratic vision which democratic systems should seek to serve' (De Gruchy 1995:39).

De Gruchy wrote *Christianity and Democracy* around the time of the first truly democratic elections in South African in 1994, completing it in the week of Nelson Mandela's presidential inauguration. During that time South Africa was clearly in need of a truly participatory democratic system, and a theological engagement with the concept of democracy was timely. Although many pastors, church members, and theologians were aloof to the political discourse and praxis surrounding the democratic transition in South Africa, De Gruchy was among those theologians and church leaders who amplified Nelson Mandela's call that the churches should be midwives of democracy.[13]

Although De Gruchy agrees – in some sense at least – with Stanley Hauerwas' oft-quoted remark that the church 'does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organisation', (see Hauerwas 1981:35). He also argues that this statement should not imply that all systems of government are equally acceptable from a Christian perspective (De Gruchy 1995:8). De Gruchy is furthermore interested in highlighting some deep connections between Christianity and democracy. In his historical account of the relationship between Christianity and democracy he argues that democracy should not be only linked to what happened in Athens in the 5th century BCE, but that Christianity, and specifically the vision of the Hebrew prophets, provided the matrix for the development of a democratic vision. It was in the womb of Western Christendom that democracy gestated, and although the relationship between Christianity and democracy is ambiguous, Christianity did also contribute to the democratic vision through its prophetic witness, even if this witness was often severely compromised. Yet De Gruchy (1995) also states:

11. Or as Paul Patton writes about 'democracy to come': 'In effect, the phrase is not simply constative but also performative: it is both an open-ended description function and a demand for more democracy' (Patton 2007:773).

12. It should be noted though that De Gruchy does not vilify the idea of a democratic system in order to affirm the promise of a democratic vision. He writes: 'It may be argued that while the democratic system has derived from the liberal trajectory in the development of democracy, the prophetic vision has been expressed in the socialist trajectory. But whatever their past relations there is today the clear need to embody the best of both and move beyond them in search of new models of a just and democratic world order' (De Gruchy 1995:275).

13. In a speech on 14 December 1992 at a meeting of the Free Ethiopian Church of Southern Africa, Mandela called on churches 'to join other agents of change and transformation in the difficult task of acting as a midwife to the birth of our democracy'. See De Gruchy (1995:218). Cf. also De Gruchy (1994:14–25).

> ... however much Christianity provided the matrix for the gestation of democracy, or through its praxis has enabled its birth in different contexts, it has been its witness to the prophetic vision as interpreted through the reign of God in Jesus Christ that has been its lasting contribution... Moreover, it is the eschatological message of the prophets, their concrete utopianism in which hope and justice have been inseparably related, which has provided Christianity with its resources in the public sphere and enabled it to remain in tension or critical solidarity with political systems.[14] (p. 275)

Although De Gruchy highlights the promise of a social understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity for the Christian tradition's critical and constructive engagement with democracy (see De Gruchy 1995:11–12; 238–248), it is especially in the prophetic vision as interpreted through the reign of God in Jesus Christ where the deep connection between Christianity and democracy is for him to be found. It is this prophetic vision that informs and constantly challenges a democratic vision of a just, free, and equal society. De Gruchy admits that this 'concrete utopia' is always beyond full realisation, and in this sense he shares an important concern underlying Derrida's use of the concept 'democracy to come'. However, De Gruchy also adds that 'every victory for human equality, freedom, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, is a step towards its fulfilment' (De Gruchy 1995:274). Although democracy might be the best political system available for the embodying what he calls 'penultimate expressions of the vision of shalom' it is not to be equated with the kingdom of God (De Gruchy 1995:276).

For De Gruchy the democratic vision is furthermore in need of some important moral and spiritual commitments. Democracy requires a democratic ethos, and although it is not the main task of the church to provide the ethos for democracy or other political systems, it is also true that a democratic vision suffers if it is not sustained by some sort of moral and spiritual force.[15]

Futural historicity, theology, and democracy in South Africa

In his book entitled *A Rumour of Spring* (2013) the seasoned journalist Max Du Preez gives an interesting analysis of the 20 years of democracy after 1994 in our 'multiply wounded, multiply traumatised' country.[16] At the heart of Du Preez's analysis is a concern for the future of democracy in South Africa, hence his question: '(A)re we facing a spring of hope, growth, and cohesion, or an Arab Spring Aftermath with popular uprisings, economic ruin, and instability?' (Du Preez 2013:3). Although Du Preez takes a harsh look at the state of democracy in South Africa he does not think that South Africa is facing anything like an Arab Spring. Part of his optimism lies in what he sees as the reawakening of civil society. Hence his forecast: 'My weather report says the winter will persist for a while, but there is a promise of an eventual spring. It might be accompanied by a few thunderstorms, though' (Du Preez 2013:279).

It is not my purpose here to comment on the state of democracy in our country, or indeed worldwide,[17] but I want to make in closing four brief remarks that I think are important to keep in mind in the attempt to provide a constructive and critical theological engagement with the discourse on democracy, also in South Africa, drawing in the process on some insights from the thoughts of Derrida and De Gruchy.

A first remark relates to the open future of democracy. By viewing democracy as an open-ended tradition one challenges the view that sees democracy as something fixed, static, and stable. Derrida's use of the notion of 'democracy to come' invites us to acknowledge the unstable and aporetic nature of democracy. We should not think too hastily that we know what democracy is, or describe too quickly a specific government as democratic or undemocratic. Processes of democratisation have the potential to demythologise harmful ideologies, but one should also remember, as Dirkie Smit has argued, that democracy itself can become ideological when used 'as self-evident expressions and for the purposes of new ideological language, mystifying and obscuring, legitimating new collective interest' (Smit 1991:296). The radical character of a 'democracy to come' with its emphasis on (impossible) unconditional hospitality (Derrida), or a democratic vision with its emphasis on true equality, freedom, and justice (De Gruchy), should continue to haunt political systems, including so-called democratic regimes. The interruptive, disruptive, and transformative potential of this future vision for a just political dispensation should not be underestimated. Christian theology can indeed, as De Gruchy has pointed out, draw on rich theological notions such as the prophetic vision of the peaceful reign of God in Christ to challenge and enliven a democratic vision in order to foster a culture that respects the life, dignity, and well-being of humans and the rest of creation.

Secondly, the emphasis on the futural openness of democracy should not invite a vague utopianism, but should be viewed as closely connected with the present and the past. In speaking of the vision of the prophetic tradition in The Scriptures, De Gruchy uses the helpful phrase 'concrete utopianism'. This reminds us that this vision seeks form and embodiment in the here and the now. In addition, we should not merely think of democracy as something informed and sustained by a vision of the future, but also as an inheritance from the past. Samir Haddad has convincingly argued that there is a connection between Derrida's 'democracy to come'

14.In his book *A Theological Odyssey: My Life in Writing* (2014), De Gruchy uses the first part of this quotation as motto for his chapter on 'Democracy, Reconciliation & Restoring Justice'.

15.De Gruchy emphasises that democracy is dependent on the participation of all citizens, and even if this is an ideal, it is an ideal worth striving for. He adds (2004:453): 'Perhaps that is why some writers insist that democracy is ultimately dependent upon the development of a spirituality in which human freedom, genuine community, and the willingness to share undergird political programs and actions'.

16.The phrase 'multiply wounded, multiply traumatised' is taken from the heading of the first chapter of Du Preez's book, and Du Preez, in turn, draws for this notion on the work of Nicaraguan psychologist Martha Cabrera.

17.See in this regard the provocative set of essays by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Daniel Bensaïd, Wendy Brown, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Kristin Ross and Slavoj Zizek in Agamben *et al*. (2012).

and a certain relation to the past, and that inheritance plays a pivotal role in Derrida's thoughts on democracy (see Haddad 2013:2, 65–72). Haddad (2013) comments:

> In addition to evoking an openness to the future, Derrida's writings on democracy also contain the injunction to inherit, and so one is reminded that the passive dimension in democracy to come does not entail doing nothing at all. There is a lot to do, for there is a call to examine democracy's history, its historicity, to negotiate this history and all it produces. (p. 72)

In other words, democracy to come has a futural openness but this openness has the structure of a futural *historicity*, a historicity that emphasises an inheritance from the past and a repetition (which is always a reappropriation of the tradition) in the present. If I can bring this in conversation with some challenges arising from the South African democratisation process: our actions should not only be informed by a future vision of what democracy can be, but by the memory of a specific history, a history of undemocratic exclusion and the struggle towards greater equality, freedom, and justice. In our discussion on the current state and future of democracy in South Africa, and on possible theological responses, we should be acutely aware that our discourse and actions are situated within a very specific historical reality and that a sensitivity to this reality should mark our remarks and shape our thoughts and actions.

A third aspect that I think requires in-depth theological engagement (although I will merely mention it here) relates to the thorny relationship between democracy and sovereignty. Several readers of Derrida's work on 'democracy to come' have highlighted the way in which Derrida seeks to disassociate this concept from the principle of sovereignty. As Alex Thomson (2005) observes:

> Derrida's ultimate target in *Rogues* may not be democracy after all, but sovereignty, and with it our sense of propriety, of sanctity and security, of the supposedly legitimate force wielded over any body, state, or identity. (n.p.)

It is the case that democracy seems to depend on sovereignty; it is difficult to imagine democracy without political control over one's territory. Yet it might be that the deepest pathos underlying Derrida's 'democracy to come' is his dream of a democracy without sovereignty. John D. Caputo (2003), who has written much on Derrida and also in the spirit of Derrida, asks some poignant questions along these lines:

> (M)ust democracy be a sovereignty? Or is the very idea of sovereignty incompatible with a true or radical democracy? Might it be that wherever democracy tries to come, sovereignty would have to go? Do we not require a *new* democratic revolution, not a revolution *to* democracy, but a revolution *in* democracy, once that turns the screw of democracy once again and turns it *into* democracy. (p. 11)[18]

Caputo is of the opinion that a radical democratic revolution would not entail jettisoning theology, but rather requires 'a parallel radicalization of theology', one in which we imagine 'the coming of God without sovereignty' (Caputo 2003:13).[19] Some theologians, like Graham Ward, have also argued that the fragility of the history of democracy, as well as the fact that some scholars now describe our current situation as post democratic, underline the need 'to revisit the theological foundations of sovereignty' (Ward 2009:39).[20] In my view an engagement with trinitarian theology offers rich resources a theological engagement with sovereignty. And a theological engagement with sovereignty should also take into account the Reformed theologian John de Gruchy's (1995) remark that:

> Sovereignty is not only a royal metaphor which separated God from the world, thereby legitimising hierarchy and paving the way for a theocratic-style tyranny; it is also a prophetic metaphor which, when applied to God, de-absolutizes and relativizes all other claimants to absolute power … Thus, whatever the inadequacy of sovereignty as a divine attribute we dare not surrender the theological claim that is being made. (pp. 257–258)

A fourth and final remark relates to the fact that a democratic system and vision is envisaged and sustained by people who embody a democratic ethos. In his book *A Theological Odyssey: My Life in Writing*, John de Gruchy engages with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's response to William Paton's book *The Church and the New Order* (drafted in 1941), in which Bonhoeffer emphasised that a return to a full-fledged democracy would be unwise for post-war Europe, because democracy 'can only grow in a soil which has been prepared by a long spiritual tradition' (De Gruchy 2014:109; cf. Bonhoeffer 2006:536). For Bonhoeffer a genuinely democratic order required a deeper spiritual foundation and value commitment that is provided by liberalism. In conversation with Bonhoeffer, De Gruchy (2014) states his own position:

> Going with but also beyond Bonhoeffer, I believe that democracy at its best is an open-ended project of transformative praxis in which the rule of law, the development of shared moral values, and the protection of human rights are affirmed, in which differences of culture and gender are respected, and in which the economic market is reconstructed in the interests of overcoming the explosion of poverty and the destruction of the environment. (p. 110)[21]

This emphasis on a moral and spiritual force needed to sustain democracy, invites as to recontextualise the song of Leonard Cohen mentioned in the *Introduction* to this article.

18.Cf. also Michael Naas's article, 'One Nation Indivisible': Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God (2006).

19.For a fuller development of Caputo's thought in this regard, see Caputo (2006:1–41).

20.Ward draws on the work of Colin Crouch who has written extensively on the so-called postdemocratic condition, and has highlighted four characteristics. The first feature is that the will of the people is not so much obtained but created, with politics being dominated by media presentation. A second feature of postdemocracy is that the political sphere is dominated by economic questions. A third characteristic of the postdemocratic condition is that there is not simply a decline in political participation but indeed active forms of depolitization. And fourthly, there is a crisis of representation in the sense that the interest of a powerful minority attain for more attention than their numbers justify and politicians represent not their constitutions but the concerns of the party of influential lobbyists. See Ward (2009:63–72).

21.De Gruchy (2014:110–111) continues: 'It is a vision of a truly equal, responsibly free and socially just world order. As such it challenges and prods us towards the ongoing transformation of present democratic systems in the struggle for fuller and more adequate expressions of the democratic vision in which human dignity and social justice is fundamental. I believe that this vision is embodied in the South African Constitution and that for this reason it must be respected, defended and implemented if we are to achieve the democratic transformation for which we hope and struggle'.

If Cohen ever were to tour South Africa and perform 'Democracy' here, it might just be that he adapts a few verses of this song:

It's coming to South Africa first,
The cradle of the best and of the worst.
It's here they got the range
and the machinery for change
and it's here they got the spiritual thirst.
It's here the family's broken
and it's here the lonely say
that the heart has got to open
in a fundamental way
Democracy is coming to the RSA.

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