

Religion and Democracy

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Religion and Democracy work in ideological and practical ways to define individuals and communities, give them stability and security and guide them towards an existence that is ethical, moral, and responsible. But their focuses are different; democracy operates in the imperfect world of everyday things while religion envisions a perfect world that can only be attained after death. As democratic governance deals with the here and now, the striving for perfection is in the here and now and life becomes a manifold process towards that goal. But the perfection sought through religion can only be obtained by following precepts that have a divine origin, that have been passed down through charismatic men whose suffering and exemplary lives sanctified their words and imbued them with an authority that puts them above challenge and change.

In this adherence to centuries old doctrines, religion attempts to encapsulate the present in the past, while democracy, which is continually evolving, attempts to set the present in the future. As a result, religion and democracy treat the individual differently. In religion, which requires total submission to prescribed scriptures and practices, movement is introspective and controlled. In a democratic society, which provides the infrastructure that supports and encourages personal exploration, growth and independence, movement is towards the unknown in the vast universe in which we have our being. So democratic values, expressed through processes rather than formularies, change and expand to accommodate new understandings of individual rights and freedoms. Witness the current debates on The Civil Union Bill and same sex marriages. As emphasis in religion is on norms and values established in ancient texts, conformity becomes a large measure of faith. But in a liberal democracy, the community, seen as the matrix that nurtures individual independence and development, propels its members into the creation of unique destinies.

Motho ke Motho ka Batho – I am, because we are.

In modern times, the migration of people across the globe, especially from East to West, has led to the formation of multi-cultural communities in strongholds of western democracy where the unfamiliar practices of migrants bring to the surface xenophobic impulses that enclose democracy within ethnocentric boundaries. In such communities, government by the people, of the people, for the people developed for a homogeneous culture, has to expand to include a diversity of cultures, which may or may not endorse the liberal rights that obtain in the indigenous community. When newly assimilated cultures, assert traditional beliefs that run contrary to these rights, they challenge taken-for-granted notions of freedom in their new

societies and paradoxically expose them as forms of coercion. And liberal democrats, committed to the expansion of individual freedom, have to ask themselves whether democracy includes the right of the individual to impose restrictions on herself and to accept what they deem to be oppressive conditions? Is the meaning of democracy, simply freedom of choice that includes the freedom to give up the freedom of choice? What is the purpose of this kind of conservative challenge? To undermine or to expand liberal democratic freedoms?

As different value systems collide and clash, what is treasured in one culture may be irrelevant in another; what is regarded as harmless in one may be hugely offensive in another.

Danish cartoonists, who caricatured the Prophet Muhammad, took for granted their freedom of expression and gave little thought to the sensibilities of the Muslims living in their midst. According to Islamic beliefs, the act of depicting the Prophet Muhammad is, in and of itself, a desecration; the irreverence of the portrayals compounds the sacrilege. The outbursts that followed the publication of the cartoons were based on mismatched perceptions, religious versus democratic values. As the arguments of the two sides were differently contextualised, there was no common ground for discussion. So there were people shouting, 'Abuse, Desecration, Racism,' on the one hand and, 'Down with censorship; viva freedom of speech' on the other. With each side clinging to its own understanding of the issue, there could be no meeting of the twain.

How do people standing on different platforms get together to reconcile their views? Who takes the initiative towards reconciliation?

Is democracy up to the new test?

The individual in the liberal democratic tradition, constantly challenging restrictions and striving for independence, is fulfilling her destiny. Should she adopt the same mode of operation when she encounters values and norms that run counter to her own in another culture? If she does, she runs the risk of being perceived as intolerant and abusive. She, however, is simply acting in accordance with values inculcated in her society. Must the freedom that she derives from her culture, a freedom that guides her thinking and actions, that makes her who she is, must her taken-for-granted freedom be abandoned when she encounters the taken-for-granted notions of another culture? Can it be abandoned when it defines who she is?

If she cannot be her authentic self when she encounters difference, who should she be? A hypocrite, a patron, a missionary? There is no equality in the assumption of such roles and in order to afford people of different cultures respect and friendship, one has to meet them on equal terms. We have worked out superficial protocols for interaction between peoples of various cultures because our meetings have been at borders and after formalities, we have gone our separate ways. Now we live as neighbours and the accepted protocols, predicated on the impermanence of relationships, are woefully inadequate. Living with people who don't think or behave as we do, we have to develop new ways to relate and while we struggle to establish new modes of interaction, we are forced to encounter our own ethnocentricity and the xenophobia that we had no idea had taken root in our beings.

But our negative feelings provide opportunities for growth as they force us to search for ways across cultural divides. The process is fraught with difficulty. How do people who embrace change interact with those who do not? Do we have the right to impose values on others

because we believe ours to be more humane? Should freedom of expression that is a tenet in our community, embed itself in another and fire off missiles at the adherence to a different set of values? Is that humane? But if one adopts a hands-off policy, how far should such tolerance go? To acceptance of authoritarian attitudes, gender bias, slavery, abuse, genocide? Do we live together but separately? Resurrect apartheid?

At present, we are witnessing cultures in collision through happenings such as the Danish cartoons, a Pope's remarks, terrorism and George Bush's desire to democratise the Middle East. And we ask, Is it right to interfere in another culture, make it conform to our norms and values? Is a return to religious orthodoxy the panacea for all the world ills? Is democracy? Will Bush's attempts to foist democracy on Iraq end the conflict in a country where Shii and Sunni have not, for over a thousand years, resolved their religious differences; where religion, perceived as a way of life prescribed by Holy Scriptures, does not allow for that constant pushing back of the boundaries of individual rights, that is characteristic of Western cultures? Since there seems to be no fit between Bush's requirements and Iraqi aspirations, is he not embarked on ideological colonisation of a diverse group of people who have been fighting colonialism in one form or another ever since the British created a land called Iraq?

In South Africa, we began to live in a multi-cultural society for the first time in 1994. Like any other multi-cultural society, once we had come out of our group areas, we had to find ways to interact. Having emerged from apartheid, we had the incentive of not wanting to appear racist and, for the most part, committed ourselves to the effort. In our Truth and Reconciliation processes, which continue informally in our daily interactions, we are learning to forgive, forget and move on. But the past is easily dealt with compared to the present and the future. With our new constitution and our new government, we have wholeheartedly embraced the ideals of democracy but on the ground, the challenges are new and respect for the individual, regardless of race, colour and creed, still remains a conscious effort. And prejudice, our *raison d'être* before 1994, is channelled in new ways – against foreigners and gays – and quietly maintained against women, the disabled and the poor.

Though we have and are making tremendous strides in overcoming our old social conditioning and though we began with a truly liberal new constitution that sought to empower the individual, we agreed to proportional representation, which cut the voter off from the representative and made the representative accountable to the party not the people. Thus began the process of disempowerment of the individual that was completed with the adoption of the floor crossing legislation that left the voter not knowing what party she was voting for and from whom she could demand accountability. Now we have government of the people, by the party, for the party. It is a form of democracy but not the democracy for which I voted in 1994.

But who can say that it is wrong when those, bound by tradition, not able to move forward into the future with the party, wish to bring back the death penalty, denounce homosexuality and the right to abortion and find obnoxious the idea of a woman as president of the country. Since the laws abolishing capital punishment and endorsing gay rights and gender equality were promulgated by the ruling party voted in by the very majority that repudiates these measures, I have to ask myself again, what actually does democracy mean? Are our leaders, who have

evolved a democratic philosophy far in advance of that of the people they lead, imposing democratic ideals in the same way that Bush seeks to impose them in the Middle East?

It is easy to define democracy in the abstract, hard to identify it in its implementation because its workings depend on human integrity, in particular the integrity of leaders. As that cannot be guaranteed because power corrupts, corruption, which rides roughshod over individual rights, becomes the vehicle that dispenses small benefits to the governed.

We got rid of apartheid but we kept the corruption and the poverty.

So what does democracy mean? Does it mean having the vote?

With the maladjustment between liberal democratic values and traditional norms that arises from race consciousness, we cannot depend on the vote to ensure the accountability of politicians.

The ease with which democracy can be sabotaged makes it necessary to have arbiters who stand outside party politics. Religious leaders are ideally situated to be arbiters but their focus on the hereafter distorts understanding of the here and now.

In Archbishop Desmond Tutu, however, we have a leader who has found a way to combine religious and democratic values. We need to learn from him how to abstract from both that which is essentially humane and life affirming.