

The Fragility of Truth:

Tolerance, Discourse Ethics and the Formation of a Democratic Citizenry

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Reconstructed identities, redefined differences and a reconstitution of diversity mark the key tasks South Africa society has undertaken in the years of transition from an oligarchic tyranny to a plural democracy. With that as the key, this essay looks at the question of tolerance in an emerging democracy in four steps. The first comments on the transition to democracy in South Africa, particularly in respect of the establishment and work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The second unpacks the discourse about nation-building which predominates since 1994. The third, a brief excursus on the question of religious diversity and political tolerance follows, attempts to show how the politics of identity and difference plays itself out in one, significant cultural form. The final step is a turn to the theory of democracy, exploring the notion of tolerance in relation to identity and difference, and indicating my preference for a discourse ethics or deliberative theory of politics.

*Toleration makes difference possible;
difference makes toleration necessary.*
Michael Walzer¹

A valued colleague at the University of Cape Town in the Department of Religious Studies recently welcomed European partners to a jointly organized conference on “diversity and ethos.”

“Come to visit us, to see us, to understand us,” he said in his opening address on *Embracing South Africa*.² But—as he poignantly concluded after probing the diversity of identities that makes up South Africa—by the mere act of saying the pronoun, “us,” we have touched on the “discourses and forces, strategies and negotiations, by which the first-person plural is constructed.” As he notes: This construction of the person as a plural reality presents “the most compelling challenges to theory and method” in the social sciences.³

Another way of putting it is this: If the social is also the political, then the political in our time is crucially about identity and difference.⁴ It is the negotiation of identity and difference that

¹ Michael Walzer, *On Toleration*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997, xii.

² David Chidester, “Embracing South Africa, Internationalizing the Study of Religion,” in David Chidester, Janet Stonier, & Judy Tobler (eds), *Diversity as Ethos*, Cape Town: Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa, 1999, 23.

³ He said this of religious studies, but it would be equally applicable to social studies generally. The notion of a “plural reality” of the person is also given definition through the concept of hybridity, a term increasingly popular in the relevant literature on identity under “post-modern” conditions.

⁴ I adopt here a meaning of “the political” derived from Sheldon S. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Seyla Benhabib (ed.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 31. Wolin

shapes some of the most intractable conflicts of our time, almost irrespective of the particular economic conditions pertaining to a specific conflict. One need think only of the former Yugoslavia, of the complex set of conflicts which bedevil central Africa right now, of the Islamic Revolution, of the intractable battle between Israel and Palestine, of Northern Ireland—and many others!—to intuitively grasp the point.

The point has been more than intuitive in the case of South Africa. In what many now call our “negotiated revolution,” we have had to concretize these issues in trying to build a new society. We had to do so initially under conditions which many others around the world also thought were, indeed, intractable—a bloodbath, after all, was the common prediction for our future as late as January 1989! By April 1994 the bloodbath was no longer expected, the sun had set on apartheid, and after a short night, the new dawn was present.

More importantly, in a country where difference and diversity had become *the* theory of politics under the apartheid regime; where identity had been inscribed in law as alienation from oneself and from the other; where otherness implied fear and hostility; and where tolerance was a swearword if it meant breaching or bridging our differences—in such a country we set out to reconstruct our differences and diversity again. We have done so with a new idea of tolerance, not a swearword this time but a word of hospitality and of generosity, of respect and of integrity. Reconstructed identities, redefined differences and a reconstitution of diversity mark the key tasks our society has undertaken in these years of transition from an oligarchic tyranny to a plural democracy.

I have repeatedly used the prefix “re“ here. It bears one further comment. It is no surprise, if one thinks of the re-birth of Europe in the late medieval period, its celebration of new energies (its spirit, if you like) and its remarkable diversity, that our President Thabo Mbeki has used the term derived from that period in speaking of an African *Renaissance*.⁵ It is a vague term, almost content-less in some respects. Yet it designates an intuitive conviction that Africa’s material disasters, whatever their genesis, will only be turned around with a new will, a regenerated capacity to see new possibilities where old actualities have bred cynicism and despair. It requires a new spirit. In an odd way, it is a religious call, from a man not known for his religiosity. And yet it is right.

This is not to discount the material disasters which Africa suffers—from the rape by colonial powers to the subsequent mismanagement and corruption of new indigenous elites, from the desertification of huge tracts of lands to the pollution of waters so vital to life, from the degradation of over-used soils to the blasts of drought. They play no insignificant role in what is possible in Africa. They also impact upon conflicts which may be expressed through difference and identity. In short, competition for, and over, material resources is impossible to ignore. But to assume that material concerns are all that matter, or that non-material concerns such as one’s identity and its difference from the identity of others are secondary, even superficial, is a fatal flaw of a modernist mentality.

The flaw lies in some version or other of the assertion that history and human beings are essentially material—a view which shapes the left and the right of eighteenth and nineteenth century European theories of the political economy. Ironically, this view may even be said to lie be-

distinguishes “politics” (legitimized, public contestation by organized social powers over access to resources—a continuous, ceaseless activity) from “the political” (an expression of the idea that a diverse society can, through public deliberation, promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity—a rare, episodic activity). In this view democracy is less a form of government (about “politics”), and more a project, a possibility, of ordinary citizens (about “the political”).

⁵ See, for example, Mbeki’s “The African Renaissance Statement,” 13 August 1998, at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1998/tm0813.htm>.

hind those theories that have traditionally been named as idealist! The problems of this view lie both in an untenable essentialism—whether of history⁶ or of the human being⁷—and in an equally untenable Nominalism.⁸

What I propose to do in this essay, in the light of these comments, is to develop the points made by looking at the question of tolerance in an emerging democracy, namely, ours. This I shall do, first, by commenting on the transition to democracy in South Africa, particularly in respect of the establishment and work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Second, I shall unpack the discourse about nation-building which predominates since 1994. Third, a brief excursus on the question of religious diversity and political tolerance follows, in an attempt to show how the politics of identity and difference plays itself out in one, significant cultural form. Fi-

⁶ Historical sciences, including economics insofar as it is more than econometrics, are deeply interpretative forms of knowledge, yielding less laws (in the Newtonian sense of empirically verifiable rules) than perspectives (or, if laws, then of a kind more like Einstein's relativity theory and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle). The unpredictability of history is methodologically mirrored in this realization, as expressed in Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). It prevents a retreat into the kind of historical science, positivist and certain of itself, that governed the major thinkers of the nineteenth century and earlier.

⁷ Michel Foucault's famous aphorism, that there is no longer any such thing as "man," only particular men (and women), expresses the anthropological basis of the critique of essentialism and a shift in philosophy.

⁸ I refer here to the critique of a colleague, Douglas McGaughey, in *Pilgrims and Strangers* (NY & Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), who notes that the Nominalist movement, beginning with Occam, accepted that ideas are ectypal and not archetypal (25). The marriage in Copernican thought between Platonic physics (mathematical description) and Aristotelian metaphysics (the world of things as independent of our consciousness) further led to a grasp of physical phenomenon which became increasingly calculating, predictive, manipulative and controlling. The pragmatic results of this move are enormous, and persuade many to believe that "facts" are empirical and that truth has to do with the facts. The irony that mathematics, a non-sense faculty of the mind, is used to explain the sensual, is lost. The point returns with a vengeance in the more nuanced, magical (that is, framed by phantasms or mental fantasies which are then given mathematical form) world of contemporary cutting edge science, especially in particle physics and cosmology.

The transition from ideas as archetypal to ectypal, McGaughey suggests (29), can be traced in scholastic debates about the status of "universals." For the Nominalist, so-called "universals" are mere abstractions (names) for the real, which is the particular only, the material world. Appearances rather than substance, to use old terms, are taken to be the real—as good a description of the market driven consumer ideology as we might get. What we end up with in the "presumption of the mathematization of reality" (McGaughey, 447) is "that all experience can be explained on the basis of material reality and causal calculating rationality." We cannot go back behind the powerful gains made by the Nominalist view of the world and the materialist paradigm, of course (who wishes to give up cars, telephones, jets, computers, et cetera?). But the costs are high too, and the weaknesses of the paradigm are by now also apparent.

Besides actuality, to put it in a nutshell, human experience and understanding concerns possibility. A materialist paradigm deals well with actuality, but ignores the role of possibility, including the conditions of possibility which lie behind its own formulations. To grasp possibility requires more than *diairesis* or calculating rationality; it required *theoria* or contemplative reason; and it issues in "universals" (sameness, by which a recognition of identity is possible) which cannot be ignored any less than can particularities (difference). We are not bound to traditional orthodox views of universals here; we may take a defensible Platonic view on universals as tentative but enduring approximations of reality, lodged in memory, by which similarity within difference can be recognized and knowledge (of anything) constructed in the first place (McGaughey, 234). We only make sense of the flux of particulars by means of universals. Our reality is experienced or constructed in the way in which we combine the universal and the particular, ideas and materiality. In short, there is no direct access to the world through the senses, only mediated access through the filters of our imagination and reflection. Or in the terms of Kuhn, paradigms, not rules, are prior. This may be termed the *aporia* of knowing and unknowing (McGaughey, 240).

It parallels a second *aporia*, namely, that of the dialectical tension between logic and pragmatics in experience: on the basis of effects, we speculate about cause. In other words, causality—whether in nature or in history—is our paradigmatically shaped understanding determined by communal constructs about how reality functions. We do not perceive causes as such, except in the most trivial sense. At the same time, the effects of the physical world we perceive are real, and we would be in trouble if we ignored them.

A final *aporia* worth noting here, because it is pertinent to the general theme of this paper, is that which determines the resultant conception of truth. Truth is not a matter of correspondence (between matter and our ideas), and untruth simply a matter of the limits of our current capacity to explore correspondences. Truth, rather, always and everywhere, simultaneously reveals (the actual) as it conceals (the possible that has not been actualized) reality (McGaughey, 248ff.). It is more like disclosure (and closure) than it is like verifiable or falsifiable evidence. Truth in this sense is radically historical, though not simply material. History is about traces as much as it is about events.

nally, I shall turn to the theory of democracy, exploring the notion of tolerance in relation to identity and difference, and indicating my preference for a discourse ethics or deliberative theory of politics.

Memory, Amnesty and a Sunset Clause

I commented earlier that the sun had set on apartheid by 1994. This is not entirely accurate. Of course, the legacy of decades of harsh policies of separatism and the even longer history of entrenched racism were not wiped out by compromises and new constitutions.⁹ We still struggle with this, and our struggle has to do with the question of tolerance, to which I will return. What I want to note rather, are two particular agreements that secured our “negotiated revolution.”

The first was a proposal that broke the back of what looked to be a final and irresolvable impasse in the CODESA¹⁰ meetings between the parties of the apartheid war. The impasse had to do with the patronage dished out by the apartheid regime to its supporters, in particular, the civil service. It was the civil service that had provided the National Party government with the capacity to offer employment to a legion of its supporters, beginning in 1948, something it had done with great consistency and efficiency. This was their political base and they were not prepared to do anything that would appear to betray it.

Ironically—because for many years he was publicly named by the apartheid regime as their “public enemy number one”—the leader of the South African Communist Party, Joe Slovo, was the one to make the proposal which dealt with the matter of the civil service, and which did the deal, so to speak. In essence, his proposal gave protection to the existing civil service, in the form of a guarantee of a further five years employment (the period of the first post-apartheid government) for those who wished to stay, and of exceedingly generous retrenchment packages for those who wished to leave. The proposal was called by Slovo, and has been referred to since as, the “sunset clause.”¹¹

The second major element of the impasse had to do with the security forces, the other key base of the previous regime. All branches of the security forces—military, police, national intelligence and the State Security Council—had been deeply implicated in the atrocities of apartheid. They needed protection from prosecution. On the other hand, those who had suffered these atrocities were determined to root out the perpetrators, precisely to pursue their prosecution. The battle over this issue was protracted; overlaying it was the desire of the political leadership of the past to avoid responsibility for any deeds done which might be judged in court to be criminal.

Two things also constrained the leadership of the liberation movements in this context, the African National Congress in particular. Acute politicians among them knew well that the victory that had been won to date had not been secured on the battle-field itself. The liberation army forces never had any chance of overcoming the forces of the apartheid regime, even if a kind of stalemate had been reached in the violent daily experiences of what has been called “low

⁹ Segregation policies were first formalized for the South African territory as a whole by the Sir Godfrey Lagden Commission of 1903-1905, under British authority. This included, among other things, the demarcation of “native reserves” (the basis of the later apartheid bantustans), the implementation of pass laws to control the movement of “natives,” the establishment of “locations” for blacks in the urban areas (the basis for later townships like Soweto), and the restriction of women and children to the rural areas. Many of these policies were inspired by earlier nineteenth century experiments in control over indigenous people and land usage. All of this makes clear that economic interests were always part of the equation, though racism goes beyond the merely economic and racial oppression, like gender oppression, may in some respects be seen to be as fundamental.

¹⁰ Convention for a Democratic South Africa, the name of the negotiating forum that met for many months before 1994 to fashion a political resolution to the conflict.

¹¹ Slovo himself has since died of cancer while carrying out his duties as Minister of Housing in the new government.

intensity conflict.”¹² A political solution was the only alternative to a protracted military struggle that neither side could win, and which would clearly damage the existing foundational structures of society to the point where little hope for a regenerated country would remain. That was the basic analysis.

But what precipitated things at the negotiations table was a report, commissioned by the African National Congress itself, on claims about atrocities committed in its own external camps in other countries at the time it was fighting the apartheid machinery. The Motsuenyane Commission Report duly arrived, and with it, incontrovertible evidence of significant torture, even deaths, of ANC people suspected of being spies or informers, at the hands of ANC cadres. Debates within the ANC and without, led to a decision to set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as an instrument of negotiation, to probe “gross human rights violations” on all sides of the conflict.

This was the opening which the apartheid regime needed. It offered a way of meeting the strong feelings among black South Africans about bringing perpetrators to book. But it restricted the process sufficiently that the perpetrators who would carry the guilt would be clearly identifiable front-line operatives. A limited form of amnesty would also be provided for, though no general amnesty. Senior leaders in both the political and military arms of the previous state were quite willing to sacrifice those lower down in return for the protection they now could expect to get.

As Dullah Omar, Minister of Justice in the first post-apartheid cabinet, tells the story, the discussions in the ANC about atrocities generally, produced the view that “what South Africa needs is a mechanism which would open up the truth for public scrutiny.” It would be an attempt to establish moral responsibility at the same time as create a framework “to humanize our society.”¹³ For this reason, it was agreed that the proposed TRC would attempt something unusual: To hold hearings to establish accountability for gross human rights violations by allowing victims to speak; and at the same time, to provide for applications for amnesty from perpetrators under the Norgard principles.¹⁴ The key shift, when compared to truth commissions elsewhere in the world, was captured in the term “reconciliation,” to which I shall return.

Such was the stuff of compromise. Both the “Sunset Clause” and the TRC have been filled with ambiguities, and both remain the subject of heated debate. Both, however, signal a

¹² The term comes from military theorists, including those of France, Britain and the USA, who had proposed “low intensity conflict” (LIC) as a way of dealing with insurgent, indigenous guerrilla forces where these could not finally be eliminated (see, for example, André Beaufre, *An Introduction to Strategy: With Particular Reference to Problems of Defence, Politics, Economics and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age* (originally *Introduction À La Stratégie*), London : Faber & Faber, 1965; and *Strategy of Action*, London: Faber & Faber, 1967). The basic idea was to beef up security forces in all strategic areas, to give them control over the population through indirect and direct means, and to accept that a state of low intensity conflict would be a permanent feature of the society. The “stick” in this strategy was a co-ordinated structure of security forces at every level, capable of isolating resistance where necessary with whatever means were required (including disinformation, covert operations and assassinations). In South Africa the requisite structure was established through “Joint Management Centres” at local, district and regional levels, each incorporating police, military, intelligence operatives, local civic leaders (both white and black), key business people and even religious leaders. The “carrot” in this approach was offered in the form of personal rewards, preferential social development for co-operating sections of local communities, and political patronage. This latter aspect of the approach was often described in South Africa as the task of “winning the hearts and minds” of the people, particularly those upon whom the capacity and moral legitimacy of the liberation struggle depended. For an analysis of what was called the “total national strategy,” the South African catch-phrase for the LIC model, see Gregory J.B. Mills, *South Africa: the Total National Strategy and Regional Policy During the Botha Years, 1978-1989*, Ph.D Thesis, University of Lancaster, 1990.

¹³ Reported in Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1999 (first published in South Africa in 1998 by Random House), 5.

¹⁴ In essence, these require that the amnesty applicant make full disclosure (which would have to be tested), and that a political motive for the deed be clearly established (which would require some evidence that a political party or body had directly or indirectly authorised the deed).

way of dealing with what appeared to be an intractable situation and a complete impasse. They may be regarded as expressions of the political practice of toleration, exercised in the desire to establish some foundation for a democratic state, in a bid to overcome war, fear, and the profound social damages which could otherwise be expected,¹⁵ and which were likely to be irreversible.¹⁶ Both compromise strategies have been messy processes, and they bring much into question, in practice and in theory. Not least, they raise questions about the meaning of truth, of democracy, of tolerance in a deeply divided society.

Whose Truth, What Reconciliation?

Let me begin my further analysis by recounting a telling story. Some while ago I had the opportunity, together with the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, to spend an hour with our Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel. In the course of our discussion, which was about South Africa's debt crisis, the conversation turned to the "Sunset Clause" invoked by Joe Slovo during the negotiations to end apartheid. It was now almost five years down the line. With exasperation, Manuel told us just what kind of sacrifice that had been, by citing an example in his own ministry in one of South Africa's provinces.

A senior Finance Ministry official had been found guilty of embezzling substantial sums of government money, and now sat in prison. But the agreement at CODESA meant that Manuel was obliged to continue paying his salary, even as a convicted thief. This money, and a great deal more like it, was of course vital to the capacity of the new government to deliver on its promises to build more houses, provide better education, supply adequate pension grants, construct roads, start irrigation schemes for poor areas, and so on. The compromises of the past had their costs in the present. And yet it could not have been otherwise.

In my view, this story expresses something of the depth of willingness among those who suffered under apartheid to give—to give a great deal!—for the sake of a hopeful and humane future. It has been, if you like, a massive exercise in toleration, if by that we mean generosity to the other. It is a spirit without which there would be no democratic South Africa.

With all its flaws and failings, this spirit remained at the core of the TRC process.¹⁷ It was exemplified not least by its chairperson, Desmond Tutu.¹⁸ What the TRC has allowed, in part at least, is for the voices of ordinary people, several thousands of them, to enter public discourse and shape our history. They are diverse voices, on both sides of the conflict. They are often searing in their pain. Surprisingly often, they speak of a readiness to enter into a rapproche-

¹⁵ Of course, the social and economic damage done by apartheid and its precedents was already significant, and it continues to limit severely the policy options available to the present government.

¹⁶ Grounds for fearing an irreversible damage to the social fabric lay, indirectly, in a dramatic economic decline, increasingly expensive goods and outdated technologies in many areas as the sanctions campaign against South Africa deepened, internal conflict of a type that was making a wider range of local areas effectively ungovernable with no stable alternative in sight, and a depleting human resource base as those who could afford it left South Africa with their skills and those who could not battled with inferior education and a lack of skills. Growing damages to communal and family structures at one level because of apartheid policies and the costs of the apartheid struggle, and to the ecology of the country at another level—in both cases, with little hope of addressing these issues under the regime of the time—added to the pessimistic scenario which began to dominate analyses of this society.

¹⁷ The TRC itself was duly established as a Constitutional body. It consisted of three committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee which held public hearings around the country; the Amnesty Committee, made up of two Commissioners and three judges; and the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee which had to formulate appropriate policies for government and parliament. The TRC also had a highly qualified Investigative Unit, and a Research Unit, the latter responsible also for the final TRC report. This report is now available as the *Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 5 vols*, Cape Town: Juta or London: MacMillan, 1999; an electronic version can be found at <http://www.truth.org.za>.

¹⁸ Desmond Tutu's own recounting of the process is contained in the just published *No Future Without Forgiveness*, London: Rider (Random House), 1999.

ment with those who caused that pain, for the sake of a joint future. Let me quote Cynthia Ngewo, mother of Christopher Piet, one of the “Guguletu Seven” who were, in the sanitized language of the security forces, “taken out” during the apartheid war. This is what she says: “This thing called reconciliation ... if I am understanding it correctly .. if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it.”¹⁹

If, as Michael Walzer proposes, *tolerance* is an attitude or a virtue which is personal, and *toleration* a practice which requires political arrangements,²⁰ then we have in the voice of Cynthia Ngewo the attitude that makes possible the bridging of boundaries, the healing of enmities, and the stabilizing of a deeply divided society. Walzer identifies five basic possibilities which may be regarded as exhibiting the virtue of tolerance: a resigned acceptance of difference; a passive, benign indifference to difference; a principled recognition of the rights of others even if those others are unattractive; openness to others, even respect; and an enthusiastic endorsement of difference, either on aesthetic grounds or functional grounds. Cynthia Ngewo represents a form of the last possibility, believing as she does that human flourishing is the vital criteria of tolerance. In this regard, she gives voice to a deeply rooted African valuing of the human being in relation to other human beings, often called in South Africa the philosophy of *ubuntu*.²¹

What Cynthia Ngewo’s voice does not represent, is a political arrangement, a successful *regime* of toleration. Walzer again: “... it is a feature of any successful regime of toleration that it does not depend on a particular form of this virtue [of tolerance]”; and further, “...political success doesn’t depend on good personal relations” in any regime of toleration.²² We are left with the political task of establishing a regime of toleration.²³ It may be, however, that people like Cynthia Ngewo contribute a great deal to the possibility of such a regime—at least under conditions where great divisions and enmities have been present and recent. In South Africa, post-apartheid, it has become common among government leaders, in political society generally, and in economic and civil society, to talk about the “moral fibre” of the nation.

Is a moral fibre necessary to building a nation, or is it secondary, superstructural, to use an old metaphor which no longer persuades? Thabo Mbeki, the economist, is one who believes it is necessary and in no way secondary. He calls on all sectors of society to “...join in the battle of ideas, or the debate, about the set of values needed to guide public policy if it is to be humane and just, honest and accountable.”²⁴ These values are in some sense spiritual, a point Mbeki surprisingly makes in the presence of James Wolfenson, president of the World Bank, at a recent international conference on corruption held in Durban, South Africa.²⁵ This conviction is echoed

¹⁹ In Krog, *Country of My Skull*, op. cit., 109.

²⁰ Walzer, *On Toleration*, op. cit., xi.

²¹ *Ubuntu* can be translated in various ways, but its anthropological claim is best represented by the phrase, “we are human by virtue of other human beings.” A philosophical exploration of this notion may be found in Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1993.

²² Walzer, *On Toleration*, op. cit., 12.

²³ Of course, there are regimes on intolerance too, as many of us know well. Here difference is no longer prized in the “drive toward unity and singularity” (Walzer, *On Toleration*, op. cit., 83). We need to be clear here about what is meant here. Apartheid in South Africa, as the name suggests, was a system predicated upon difference—racial and ethnic difference. But its recognition of difference was based upon a unified, singular ideology into which all other differences were required to fit, or for whose purpose they were, indeed, constructed. It was not a matter of tolerance, but of segregation, or in crude terms, of divide and rule.

²⁴ Thabo Mbeki, “Religion in Public Life: Engaging Power,” in James R Cochrane (ed.), *Religion in Public Life: Multi-Event 1999 Conference Proceedings*, University of Cape Town, 1999, 50-52; also available at <http://www.ricsa.org.za>.

²⁵ His comments are: “In our own, national, case, we would make bold to say that a basic factor which informs corrupt practice is the disjuncture that has occurred between spiritual and material human needs. It seems clear that in that contest, the material has assumed precedence over the spiritual. In many instances, material values have gained their greater worth in the eyes of many

in the United Nations Declaration on Tolerance which defines tolerance as “the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace.”²⁶

Even if we concede this point at some level, what kind of moral fibre is necessary to a regime of toleration, if any? The picture is not clear. Walzer, at least, believes that a regime of toleration may be stable even if no group likes any other group, as long as they are resigned to living with each other rather than fighting each other.²⁷ In the context of the many South African TRC debates, Rajeev Bhargava, from India, has suggested that the most one can hope for within the context of political transition is a “minimally decent society.”²⁸ Does Cynthia Ngewo’s kind of tolerance help then, does it contribute very much?

I don’t think we can answer that question easily in the abstract. There are other testimonies that signal a far greater reluctance, even a repugnance, to forgive or accept in the way that Cynthia Ngewo has. Many even wonder whether the TRC, as such, has not been a colossal, expensive failure. We may put the question differently, therefore. Has the TRC helped us along the way of building a democratic regime of toleration? Has it added to the moral fibre necessary to build a nation that will work?

The legacy of the TRC cannot yet be judged with any great certainty. But some things have become clear. The process has been filled with contradictions, paradoxes and ambiguities. Many perpetrators have been named, some have already received amnesty,²⁹ many others have confessed. But virtually no-one in the higher reaches of government who planned and carried out apartheid policies, including the LIC programme, has been before the Commission or admitted to any direct responsibility. This has led many of their operatives who have appeared before the Commission to express a deep sense of betrayal. This in turn has meant that they have disclosed information which might otherwise not have come to light.

One of the major problems to arise with the TRC has been the question of the beneficiaries of apartheid, those who neither organized nor participated in its machinery, but who were happy to have it, both for their personal advantage and because of their fear of black South Africans. They are people like myself, whites in the first instance, many “coloureds” and Indians too, a few blacks—people whose relative advantage now as a result of long-term acquisition of skills, resources and capital keeps the imbalance and inequality of our society in place.

Among those who have most strongly questioned the TRC on this point has been Mahmood Mamdani of Uganda, a leading African political scientist and until recently a colleague at the University of Cape Town. He wonders whether reconciliation, a defining term for the TRC, has turned into an embrace of evil. To be sure, many individual perpetrators have come forward, some of the revealing the real extent of the horror that characterized apartheid rule. But those who gained most from apartheid, yet who committed no individual crime, have virtually escaped censure, let alone taken responsibility for the past. These include not only the political leaders of the time, but all beneficiaries of apartheid—mostly, but not only, white South Africans. “What I

people at the expense of spiritual values.” Thabo Mbeki, “Address at the Opening of the 9th International Anti-Corruption Conference,” Durban, October 10, 1999, at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1999/tm1010.html>.

²⁶ **Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, UNESCO, 16 November 1995, Article 1.1.**

²⁷ Although Walzer also notes that any regime of tolerance, even the most open one, carries with it the ongoing task of sustaining toleration: “toleration is always a precarious achievement,” *On Toleration*, op. cit., 13.

²⁸ Rajeev Bhargava, “Is the Idea of a Truth Commission Justified?,” conference paper, International Seminar on Justice, Truth and Reconciliation in Transitional Societies, Geneva, December 1998.

²⁹ The amnesty process still continues, though the TRC otherwise has shut down, simply because of thousand of applications for amnesty which must still be considered, each one requiring substantial time and resources to deal with adequately. This has in fact led one leading figure (Barney Pitso, Chair of the Human Rights Commission) to suggest that a general amnesty should now be applied, primarily to save finances which can be directed towards urgent, unfilled commitments to reconstruction.

still ask myself,” says Mamdani, “is whether it is not easier to live with perpetrators than beneficiaries.”³⁰

Perhaps the most poignant reminder of the limits of the TRC came with the hearings at which ex-President F. W. de Klerk, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient along with Nelson Mandela, led the National Party delegation. Despite some relatively superficial words of apology for the past, the prevailing tone of their submission was one of avoidance of responsibility. As Antjie Krog describes the end of the hearing—when Chairperson Tutu’s skin hung “dull and loose from his face,” his shoulders “covered in defeat”—this was “The Day of the Undeniable Divide. One moment it was the closest, the next moment the farthest apart that people in this country have ever been.”³¹

Perhaps we might filter differing views of our history, and hence of how our future should be organized, through the question of what constitutes a regime of truth? I do not propose an answer here, but I do want to put the question as starkly as possible, in the form of a brief anecdote from the TRC. The occasion was the amnesty hearing of a former apartheid torturer, Captain Jeffrey Benzien, about whom Ria Kotze, a psychologist who had been treating him for auditory hallucination, gave testimony. Throughout his lengthy recounting over several days of his deeds of torture (including a graphic demonstration of how he wet-bagged victims), Benzien experienced apparent memory losses regarding torture he had administered. Kotze was asked if she believed he was lying or telling the truth. Her disturbing comment was simple: “In my job there are, in a sense, no lies—all of it ties in, reacts to, plays upon the truth”³² The undeniable divide in South Africa may be described as differing plays upon, or reactions to, the truth.

Building a Nation—Divided

This “Undeniable Divide,” what is it then? If a regime of toleration is what South Africans have built for the moment at least, it is one which is not yet consummated. It might not be reflected in an attitude of tolerance at all, in fact.

The TRC hearings and process offered us a double-vision of our society. On the one side, an astonishing array of ordinary people have had their voices placed into the public sphere in ways that penetrate the national consciousness, whatever one’s reaction to what is revealed in the process. Their discourse has become indelibly part of the national discourse, in perpetuity. Whether “the truth” has emerged cannot be determined on the basis of facts in the first place, though those have played their role,³³ but only in terms of the validity of foundational, and perhaps founding, narratives.

The TRC, we might say, has contributed to the *reservoir* of memory upon which nationhood must be built, especially if that nationhood is to take into account the divided past in its present policies and programmes. It has also given South Africans a *repertoire* of stories, discourses, memorials, images and symbols by which we might measure ourselves as citizens and, in its recommendations, a *palette* of practical options by which we might engage in fashioning a new canvas of commonality in the face of an irreducible diversity. In short, the TRC in itself func-

³⁰ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, op. cit., 112.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

³² Krog, *Country of My Skull*, op. cit., 78.

³³ Unsurprisingly, the “facts” are contested. A recent book which has received substantial coverage in the media, in part because its author has made great use of controversy and editorial letter pages to defend her position, is Anthea Jeffrey, *The Truth about the Truth Commission* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1999); the book attempts to “expose” the weaknesses inherent in the TRC’s investigations, criticises its standards of evidence, and documents “facts” which were not considered or could not be finally determined even though they are reported by the TRC. The critique has itself been widely criticized in turn.

tions as a signifier of the task of expressing in political and social terms, the necessary link between the one and the many.

The other side of the double-vision we experience comes with the *aporia* between the one and the many, also captured by the TRC. There is some kind of resolution, and there is a painful realization on other levels that no resolution has been effected by the TRC. This is the “Undeniable Divide” I have mentioned. It is most powerfully articulated in narrative form by the rejection of any reconciliation with perpetrators on the part of victims of apartheid—and the TRC hearings had its fair share of such testimonies;³⁴ or by the kind of refusal of responsibility seen in the testimony by former President F. W. de Klerk and his party. The divide is most evident socially in the presence at hundreds of hearings of large numbers of black South Africans, and in the great majority of them, no white South Africans.³⁵

The “undeniable divide” is best captured politically in a phrase often used by President Mbeki: he describes our South Africa as consisting in “two nations” and not one. To unpack this statement, let me turn to Mbeki’s reply to the debate over his inaugural presidential address in Parliament earlier in 1999.³⁶ His analysis is predicated less on racism—though he does not ignore the question—and more on differing visions or projects which drive national commitment. These are strongly ideological, and they have material grounds.

Briefly, Mbeki’s speech embraces all opposition parties who take a consensus position on the task of national reconstruction,³⁷ and attacks the two parties he believes resist the consensus. One does so in the name of religion,³⁸ the other in the name of neo-classical market ideology.³⁹ That Mbeki tackles both these bodies, the one by venturing into theology (an unusual and risky move for Mbeki, or for any politician in an avowedly secular state), the other by recalling philosophical history, is interesting in itself for its dual emphasis. His attack on the African Christian Democratic Party touches deeply on the question of the *human values* he deems necessary to national reconstruction; and his attack on the Democratic Party similarly probes the economic vision by which *material goods* might be secured.

The ACDP he accuses of dealing in a theology of death rather than life, “a mean, angry, vengeful, soulless and retributive theology” at odds with the need to embrace diversity (including a publicly acknowledged plurality of religions) and build bridges across the hatred and distrust of the past. The exclusivist, absolutist claims the ACDP make undermine the national project at this level, for Mbeki. It should perhaps be noted at this point that Mbeki, though himself not religious, is not an enemy of religion, nor of Christianity in particular, though he has never been re-

³⁴ Various reasons have been given for taking such a position, from a conviction that the truth has not been told and that the testimony of a perpetrator cannot therefore be trusted, to an inability not only to forget what was done but to forgive it (and no-one can judge this morally, as forgiveness is entirely in the hands of the one aggrieved), to a basic distrust of the TRC process because it was a political compromise of the negotiated settlement, to anger because the TRC process appears in some cases to undercut the possibility of bringing civil or criminal cases against perpetrators (an anger intensified by the lack of visible reparations to date, to those victims who have appeared before the TRC in trust that they will be given some form of reparation).

³⁵ Even attempts by “anti-apartheid” Christian churches and ecumenical bodies to plead with white congregants to attend hearings for the sake of overcoming the visual evidence of the great racial divide produced very little fruit.

³⁶ Thabo Mbeki, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/1999/tm0630.html>. See also *New South African Outlook*, vol. 1, no. 3, July 1999

³⁷ In particular, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO), the Freedom Front (the most conservative of the white Afrikaner parties in Parliament), and—of particular note—the National Party which drove apartheid in the past.

³⁸ The African Christian Democratic Party, which considers the founding Constitution fatally flawed by its refusal to acknowledge the Christian God as supreme and which generally takes a position which might be described as anti-humanist on a wide range of policies.

³⁹ The Democratic Party, whose approach to opposition politics and whose policies could be compared with Thatcher’s Tories in England, and Reagan’s Republicans in the USA.

served in his criticisms of religion when it does not meet its own stated precepts in respect of human dignity and justice (precepts he derives in large measure from African humanism in conjunction with the humanists of the European Renaissance, and from Marx).

The DP he accuses of adopting wholesale the political theories—and accompanying material interests—of Jeremy Bentham in late 18th, early 19th century England. In particular, Mbeki singles out the linked claims that there is no such thing as society (only individuals), quoting Bentham: “the individual—the basic unit of the social sphere—is an atom and there is no self or individual greater than the human individual.” In a state organized along such lines, Mbeki notes, it is inevitable that individual interests take precedence “over the interests of all other persons taken together.” In this world-view is represented “the fundamental idea that everything must be left to the great leveller, the market, which is driven by the notion that ‘self regarding interest is predominant over social interest’.” This represents, Mbeki argues, a world-view incompatible with some of the key elements necessary for a common national project of reconstruction in the face of the heavy oppression of the past and the continuing, deep inequalities of the present.

The speech may, with justification, be seen as a clear statement of a conviction that South Africa still lives as “two nations”—one privileged and seeking to protect its privilege, the other seeking to build out of political freedom the foundations for broad-based economic and cultural freedom. It is the existence of these “two nations,” in particular the overly powerful influence of the privileged one, that most bedevils the project of reconstruction and development and threatens the future of democracy.

If we then take the problem of nation-building to be that of the link between the one (nation) and the many (diverse particularities of its people), between sameness and difference, then the South African experience confirms at least six things.

First, the construction of a national identity, of a generalized sameness, is a task and not a final achievement.

Second, this task is not undermined by diversity and plurality, because both diversity and plurality can be politically institutionalized in ways which are productive and capable of producing a foundational consensus.⁴⁰

Third, where the history of the nation is one of contestation and division, as is starkly the case in South Africa, a reservoir of memories able to integrate differing experiences of the past in ways which are constructive rather than destructive becomes particularly important; this requires a repertoire of discursive strategies and constructs by which the conflictual history of diverse groups may be brought into relation with each other short of ending relational possibilities—which would be to enter into violence.⁴¹

Fourth, any durable project of nation-building arising out of conflict and division depends upon some rapprochement between dominant groups and subjugated ones, in which the former are able to find guarantees for their survival even as the latter are able to find guarantees for their voice and presence to be honoured in word and deed (the alternative, again, is violence, and a chain of violence).⁴²

⁴⁰ The South African Constitution is the first such instrument in our case, and it explicitly verbalizes the notion of national reconciliation in the light of a history of suffering and injustice as a founding principle in the preamble.

⁴¹ Of course, violence, if it is not gratuitous, aims at restoring the possibility of relationship in the face of a refusal of it from one side. It stops when that refusal turns to acceptance, though options to re-engage with violence might be held in the background until acceptance appears to be institutionally grounded and reasonably well-secured against further arbitrary refusals. The history of the period of negotiations in South Africa could readily be described as conforming to these axioms.

⁴² Of course, there will be no such process where the dominant group(s) feel secure in their domination and face no significant penalties for its continuance, as was the case with the apartheid regime until about the mid-nineteen eighties.

Fifth, such guarantees cannot be made a priori; they are the stuff of negotiation (and breakdowns in negotiation), of meaningful sanctions to ensure the continuation of negotiations, and of compromises in all directions.

Sixth and finally, the task of nation-building requires that any enduring grounds for division be addressed, and be seen to be addressed; in the case of South Africa, this applies particularly to the two elements of our dominant political economy—“race” divisions, linked to class or economic divisions. Increasingly, we are seeing that gender divisions are equally significant, producing a range of political practices and acts which shape the public sphere in unprecedented ways.

I would add one final comment concerning the project of building a nation. It is no longer self-evident that nationality, or oneness and sameness in this sense, is an adequate construct by which to understand contemporary politics and hence the meaning of democracy.⁴³ Nation-states are products, practically and theoretically, of the modernist era. They continue to play a role—indeed, some would argue that they have a vital role in some configurations⁴⁴—but they are also under attack or threatened by forces which pay no attention to national identities or boundaries, so called “globalization.” We may like to think that these forces are new expressions of imperialism, no longer living on territorial conquest but rather on victory in cyberspace and virtual bodies (which is what I would call the modern market where it has to do with financial capital and speculative ventures), and to some extent there would be grounds for this.⁴⁵ But it certainly is nothing like any version of imperialism we know from the past in other respects, and many elements of globalization escape anyone’s particular control.

On other grounds, both practical and ethical (with practical import), we may wonder about nation-states. In the case of South Africa, this concerns our relationship with neighbouring states, which under the apartheid regime and by virtue of South Africa’s powerful relative economic presence, suffered in every respect the costs of the past. Do we now bring the shutters up or loosen borders to rectify this situation? Do we negotiate with richer parts of the world on our behalf alone, or on behalf of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)? Do we

⁴³ Samuel Huntington’s famous thesis about “culture wars” as contained in his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996 is one example of an attempt to re-theorise international politics along different lines (civilizational identities rather than national identities). I would agree with David Skidmore (“Huntington’s Clash Revisited,” in *Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 1998, 181-188), however, that his case is suspect. Skidmore cites, among things, that Huntington fails to persuade both theoretically and empirically: he provides no adequate definition of what constitutes a civilization by which we might identify one and its difference to others; he offers a one-sided picture of underlying trends in the international system, including modernization, globalization and democratization; he claims a divergence among states without considering the evidence of widespread convergence in many respects; it is not clear, as he claims, that the West as a whole is in relative decline (especially after the recent “Asian crisis”!); and his argument does not cope well with a number of recent empirical cases (Bosnia, the Persian Gulf war, growing ties between China and the Middle East).

⁴⁴ Political philosopher Jean Elshtain, in personal conversations, for example, has suggested that coalitions of nations, especially where they have some sort of regional integrity, may be important in resisting the centralizing controlling agencies of globalization. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the one example Michael Walzer denotes as a possible exception to the categories of regimes of toleration he enumerates may be the European community, which defies easy categorization or theorization; see Walzer, *On Toleration*, op. cit., 48ff.

⁴⁵ There is little doubt, for example, that information technology and the communication systems will play a vital role in the economies of the next century. In both respects the USA is so far in the lead with its systems and resources that it is hard to imagine it not dominating much of what happens economically for some time to come, and thus politically too, of course. One example of the USA’s centrality in what some call the “New Economy,” is a recent mapping of the major internet backbones through which cyber transactions take place globally (“Spinal Tap,” in *Intelligence*, vol. 5, no. 10, 1999, 13). It shows that the USA is the major hub for the rest of the world, and that virtually all traffic, no matter whence its origin, sweeps through the USA at some point. In short, US based e-commerce providers carriers and platform-providers are at the core of the “New Economy.”

passively turn a blind eye to xenophobia,⁴⁶ or do we actively structure our public institutions and political practices to counter-act it?

Here too comes a crucial test of what we mean by the one and the many, by identity and by difference, and hence, by toleration and by democracy. Whatever we now mean, it seems impossible to consider identity and difference without taking into account the radical plurality which impacts almost every society today, and hence, the complicated effects of experienced diversity. This is not new in some ways, as I might recall simply by noting my own South African origins, through four grandparents, to Scotland, Flemish territory, German aristocracy and Bengalese slaves, going back into the late 17th Century. But it is pervasive in ways that make for a qualitative difference. And that gives rise to our need to deconstruct the notion of the nation-state and national identity, though it is by no means clear what configurations of states and peoples will emerge out of that history. In this regard I do not share the high optimism of some post-Cold War theorists.⁴⁷

Culture and Civilization through the Lens of Religion

Whether the divisions that characterize South Africa are racial, economic or gender-based, they are loaded with cultural weight. A large body of settlers or immigrants to the land have brought with them, beginning some 350 years ago, a diverse range of cultural fragments. The encounter with aboriginal peoples similarly meant another set of cultural fragments, almost as diverse in their own way.⁴⁸ Persistently, the cultural prism by which world-views are interpreted and communicated has been strongly religious, on all sides. While Islam arrived very early in the process, and Christianity from the outset, with African traditional religions long present, since then Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Confucianists have also added significantly to the diverse character of the population. Christianity itself, by far the dominant religious tradition, has also become increasingly fragmented, and in many respects it can no longer be considered a single tradition.

Has religion contributed to tolerance, or has it engendered intolerance? The evidence is not strong on either side. A recent study on political intolerance and religion in South Africa shows the following.⁴⁹ First, it notes the existing literature on attitude surveys of political tolerance. This shows that South Africans exhibit a high degree of political intolerance, whose public face emerges in political and criminal violence, as well as in extraordinarily high levels of rape, child abuse, suicide and divorce. Second, using a large data set (3 031 respondents) based on interviews, the study shows that the relationship between political and religious (in)tolerance is minimal. Whether or not someone is religious, irrespective of what their particular religion is, appears to have no direct bearing on their political attitudes. Equally, despite the fact that all the major religions include some value of respect or “love” for the other, the findings suggest that

⁴⁶ Xenophobia in South Africa is primarily directed against other Africans. A recent incident, for example, saw three African expatriates thrown to their death off a moving train, for no other reason than that their accents betrayed them, and with the argument that “these people are taking our jobs.” The question of morality or spirituality intertwines once more with that of materiality.

⁴⁷ Most notably Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon, 1992.

⁴⁸ The major groups occupying South Africa in this period were Khoi, San, Nguni, Tswana, Pedi, and Venda, with some groups—the Nguni in particular—consisting in several major subdivisions (The Nguni, for example, include Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ndebele, among others).

⁴⁹ Amanda Gouws & Lourens M du Plessis, “Political Intolerance and Religion in South Africa,” unpublished paper, 1999.

religion plays little role in engendering political tolerance.⁵⁰ In respect of religion, it must be noted that some level of religious tolerance, even under hegemonic Christian rule, has for long been the norm. Nevertheless, the study suggests, “the free exercise of religious rights could contribute to ... ‘reforming a free society’ by working hard at ‘reforming the individuals who make it up.’ In this way religious tolerance can become the social laboratory for inculcating political tolerance too.”⁵¹

With this thought, we are back to the issue of the moral fibre of the nation, and the view that a solid moral foundation is necessary to a healthy political society, and indeed, to a sustainable economy. The high levels of corruption in the South African state, its business community, and civil society generally, may be taken as an indicator of the pertinence of this view. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Mbeki administration has placed a premium on combating public sector corruption, and in calling on all other sectors of society to follow suit.⁵²

At the same time, he and others have noted that the foundations for the kind of behaviour which would inculcate a different ethic in state bureaucracies, in business and elsewhere cannot be legislated or politically generated, though both legislation and political decisions and acts can encourage this. The foundations lie deeper, in the formation of the person. This, in turn, depends heavily upon relationships that are more immediate, in the first place (usually), the family.

Indeed, one of the significant contributory reasons for the high levels of crime, corruption and general moral malaise in South Africa probably lies in the destruction done to African families through the migratory labour system and the systematic undermining of family structures which accompanied this over almost the entire century. A personal sense of internal order and relational justice is difficult to establish under such conditions, especially in the face of very high and visible levels of inequality in South African society.⁵³ This is complicated where the external trappings of justice appear as unjust, as was the case for black South Africans under apartheid, so that there is no experience of normative justice as a social pedagogy.

One significant location of a resistance to this kind of destructive patterning has been in the African initiated churches (AICs).⁵⁴ A good example is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), inspired by the Pentecostalist movement of Zion City Church in Chicago earlier in the century. It claims some two million plus members. Its ethic is deeply rooted in its members, and includes strong sanctions against alcohol consumption and gratuitous sexual intercourse,⁵⁵ as well promoting a strong work ethic and honesty in dealings with others. All of this is bound up with what is emerging as a self-conscious claim to have harboured and treasured the best of African tradition, albeit transformed in its Christianized forms, precisely those values and virtues whose loss others now bemoan and for whose recovery they campaign.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ The single exception might be among the Jews, who evidence a relatively higher level of religious and political tolerance as a whole, perhaps, the report suggests, because “the persecuted have a better understanding of tolerance than those who do not have a history of persecution for religious beliefs do” (Gouws & du Plessis, op. cit.).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The details of the work that has been done, and some reflective essays, are captured in four volumes recently published by the Public Services Commission, namely, S Sangweni & D Balia (eds), *Fighting Corruption: Strategies for Prevention (vol. 1)*; *Towards a National Integrity Strategy (vol. 2)*; *South African Perspectives (vol. 3)*; and V Mavuso & D Balia (eds), *Invitation to Ethics Management (vol. 4)*; all Pretoria: UNISA, 1999.

⁵³ The Gini Coefficient for South Africa in most years is either the worst or the second worst among the sixty or so measurable countries, on a par with Brazil.

⁵⁴ Also commonly called “African Independent Churches,” or “African Indigenous Churches.”

⁵⁵ Which makes it a bulwark against the rampant HIV/AIDS epidemic.

⁵⁶ This kind of claim is evident in the presentation to the TRC made by the ZCC in three days of hearing about the role of faith communities in apartheid. See James Cochrane, John de Gruchy & Steve Martin (eds), *Facing the Truth: South African Faith*

Focusing the lens of religion from one angle, then, it appears in the South African context at least, that religion and religious traditions offer resources for the shaping of the moral fibre necessary to sustain a regime of tolerance (or to push for it, if it is not yet in place) and build the capacity of persons to act as citizens in a larger unity than the one that defines them religiously or culturally. If I may rotate this lens a little, we may say that the human spirit grows in such places of particularity and identity, and that this growth of human spirit is consequential for a healthy society. This is true even if that same particularity and identity give rise in the accentuation of difference to intolerance at other levels.

As Gouws and du Plessis show in their study, it is not that religion correlates either way with political tolerance or intolerance, nor for that matter with the depth of democratic vision and practice which an open, plural society needs. Yet one may still claim with good grounds that religion (or cultural representations generally), once lodged in a context where a regime of tolerance has been established, offers important resources by which such a regime may be sustained.

Focusing the lens of religion from another angle, however, it must be said that the AICs which I have used as the case to establish the positive role of religion, appear in the analysis of Gouws and du Plessis as among those religious communities who exhibit the highest levels of political intolerance. Perhaps, the authors suggest, this is because they are inherently deeply conservative theologically and with respect to traditions. They are thus more inclined to suspect the outsider, the other—particularly any other whose world-view might threaten the tight orthodoxies or relatively rigid principles which lie behind their own success or viability. Religion, from this angle, is Janus-faced.

Moreover, religion, especially in as much as it is bound up with deep cultural traditions, is one face of what we might call the clash of civilizations in South Africa. The three hundred year history of Christian missions evidences this clash, as does the current recovery and public revival of African traditional religion in the face of the modernizing processes of globalization. But it would be an over-simplification to read into this merely a set of oppositions. It is not just identities predicated upon particular cultural and religious histories which are in conflict with one another, as between two prides of lions fighting over territorial boundaries. It is that no particular cultural or religious “civilization” is pure, without substantial and sometimes radically disparate internal tensions. No leading Africanist, to repeat something I said earlier, wishes to forego the benefits of modernity or of globalization—one merely needs to observe an African *sangoma* (traditional herbalist and healer) doing business with a cellphone to get the point!

In short, the articulation of religion and culture we see to be characteristic of our situation and time is one which is both internally and externally contested, fractured and diverse. Identity, even in the most rural and isolated areas of South Africa is seldom monomorphic. On the contrary, there is reason to accept that it is increasingly polymorphic, despite the wide variety of movements around the world which strive to reinvent and reimpose particular identities.⁵⁷

Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999; in particular an essay by Robin Petersen, “The AICs and the TRC.”

⁵⁷ Indeed, these phenomena might well be seen as evidence for the rise of polymorphic identities, by virtue of the threats they pose to monomorphic identities and the resultant reactions. But more than that, most programmes aimed at reclaiming particular identities (often of religious character) are themselves faced with having to suppress polymorphism internally, a contradiction that is often their undoing, or at least, which contains the seeds of the own destruction over the long run. The Taliban in Afghanistan offer a good example.

What then of Difference?

The set of explorations I have carried out by using the South African experiences of the TRC and discourse about nation-building, together with the excursus on religion and tolerance, leave me with one more move to make—a return to the theory of tolerance and democracy with which I began. The experience of the last few years convinces me, at least, that an enduring regime of tolerance under conditions where a deep historical scarring of the body politic exists, can only be built on the back of a commitment to deliberative politics in consensual mode. This is not the same as the characteristic Westminster mode in which it is assumed that opposition parties and groups in society have the primary role of being watchdogs over the ruling party, while seeking to maximize their opportunities to turn the scales (by any means, foul and fair, that will not tarnish them irrevocably). Nor, for that matter, can politics be as heavily delivered to the faceless bureaucrats of the civil service as is often the case in the Westminster mode.

In short, I find myself in sympathy (though not uncritically, for a variety of reasons) with the argument by Jürgen Habermas for a discourse ethics in political life. I am, however, less inclined than he is to aim for discourse practices which reduce the impact of traditions, or particularities, to giving good grounds for validity claims in open argument. The Enlightened intellectual, if you like, must not only make room for opinions on her terms, but also accept that other terms may have to be taken into account—if for no other reason than that particularities, or group identities, however formed, have considerable capacity to allow for what I might call “backlash mobilization” against the Enlightened consensus.⁵⁸

In a way this recapitulates what Walzer calls the twin modernist projects in relation to toleration and democracy. The first of these is democratic inclusiveness, which means that people, as citizens rather than as members of a particular group, enter the city as individuals. The second project, which deals with the inclination to separation as an alternative to entering the city, is “to provide the group as a whole with a voice, a place, and a politics of its own.”⁵⁹

But my argument goes with Walzer’s one step further. It accepts, within the limits of Walzer’s claim that various kinds of regimes of toleration work well even where the attitude of tolerance is not strong, the global situation as defined by the United Nations declaration on tolerance, that because of “the globalization of the economy and ... rapidly increasing mobility, communication, integration and interdependence, large-scale migrations and displacement of populations, urbanization and changing social patterns...escalating intolerance and strife potentially menaces every region. It is not confined to any country, but is a global threat.”⁶⁰

This is what we might call the condition of postmodernity. It produces a situation close to, but beyond Walzer’s view on immigrant societies, or nation-states under immigration pressure. This is one where “people have begun to experience what we might think of as a life without clear boundaries and without secure or singular identities.”⁶¹ In a single family, ethnic, religious and cultural differences are part of the pattern. Hybrid, or “hyphenated” selves emerge, albeit predicated upon particular identities without which the hybrid itself would be unrecognizable.

This brings us back to where I began, with Chidester’s welcome of visitors to South Africa. I remind you of his bold assertion that the use of the first-person plural—“us,” “we”—

⁵⁸ There are more positive reasons for accepting this, among them a valuing of the other and a respect for their dignity *as defined by them*.

⁵⁹ Walzer, *On Toleration*, op. cit., 85.

⁶⁰ Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, UNESCO, 16 November 1995, Article 3.1.

⁶¹ Walzer, *On Toleration*, op. cit., 87.

touches on the “discourses and forces, strategies and negotiations, by which the first-person plural is constructed.” Difference makes this statement necessary, because homogeneity, if it *has* been the nature of earlier societies in other times, is not characteristic of many sectors of many societies today, and increasingly almost everywhere. Difference is also no longer simply between “them” and “us.” It is increasingly internal to us. Fundamentalism, Walzer suggests, is basically a response to this situation—the ideological form of a longing for “more coherent communities and a more unified consciousness” in the face of perceived secular confusion and anarchy.⁶² Intolerance may then become an attack on the present order for the sake of a putatively redeemed one. At least this would be the desire which fuels attitudes, and in many cases, action.

Yet the postmodern, if that is what it is, is not a putative stage in a progressive development of history, but an alternative in the midst of the modern. In Walzer’s view, this means that any new understanding of tolerance, for now at least, must tolerate difference twice—“on a personal as well as a political level.”⁶³ The mix of a unified national project such as the one South Africa has now embarked upon, and the public recognition of diversity in the population of the nation, is a necessary programme of building a larger “us” without sacrificing the smaller foundations of “us-ness,” to coin a word, and the concomitant acknowledgement and hospitality to those who we designate “them” amongst us.

If we return to the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we might recall the words of a psychiatrist who was involved in dealing with many of those who testified of the horrors to which they had been subjected, or of which they had in fact been the agents. Dr Sean Kaliski: “But there will be no grand release—every individual will have to devise his or her own personal method of coming to terms with what happened.”⁶⁴

Here there is an understanding of the memories of the past, of the task of the present, and of the ambiguity of the future which gives us no easy answers, but sets us out on a project without end. A regime of toleration is necessary which will allow this to happen, and Walzer is right—it does not matter at this stage whether an attitude of tolerance derives from resignation at the one extreme, or enthusiastic embrace at the other, so long as toleration is a political arrangement with requisite measures in force to establish and sustain it.

Yet, and yet, it does matter that a Cynthia Ngewo speaks of humanity and seeks to embody it. It does matter that regimes of toleration encourage this kind of attitude or mind set. It does matter that differences are accorded some measure of respect. It matters not because this is the only way to stabilize a political order—for it clearly is not the only way—but because human being and human becoming lives off possibility, even it is has to live in actuality. And possibility transcends, and keeps transcending actuality. It is a human characteristic that one gives oneself to this whenever one can—even in abject poverty, even in solitary confinement, even under torture, even on death row.

If you like, politics has to do with the material ordering of relations in a society. But, as many societies know to their cost, if that is all politics is without remainder, the possibility of something else will rear its head, and the human spirit—the spirit of new possibility—will break forth. That is a political fact, as much as it is an anthropological one.⁶⁵ In all the stories of the TRC, there are what Krog calls “under-stories,” matrices which determine what is left out, what

⁶² Ibid., 88.

⁶³ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁴ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, op. cit., 129.

⁶⁵ That it is an anthropological fact is not merely a theological claim, though it certainly is that as well for most religions. It is also supported by a wide range of human scientific studies, both in positive claims and by virtue of those negative counter-experiences which we call “pathologies” or “anomie” or “clinical depression,” and the like.

is used, how it is used, in a narrative—and an invisible audience for whom one constructs one's story: family, colleagues, new rulers, and so on.⁶⁶

Every listener decodes and encodes the story again, in order to construct a truth. That is the fragility of our being. This does not mean a lack of commitment to a particular social vision, a particular justice order, a particular regime of toleration. It means that toleration is the sine qua non of political life in our time—and violence its end. That is why we live with the fragility of truth, and die by the hand of those who seek to possess it as their own.

⁶⁶ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, op. cit., 85.