


Political theology, radical democracy, and explorations of liberation

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In 2012, Vuyani Vellem made a brief proposal for a deeper engagement with political theorists and activists working around the notion of radical democracy, a proposal he reaffirmed in 2013 in articulating the challenge for the church in the face of an inability to contribute to meaningful change amidst vast economic inequality in South Africa. Despite extensive engagement with the work of Vellem in recent years, this particular proposal has so far not been explicitly picked up. This article places Vellem's proposal within the more recent debates around public theology and political theology in South Africa, proposing the possibility of a constructive dialogue between political theologies and South African theologies of liberation in picking up Vellem's suggestion.

Contribution: After an overview of the very recent attempts at engaging political theology in the South African context, and an overview of Vellem's proposal around radical democracy, two more recent theological attempts at engaging with radical democracy are introduced and elements that might extend Vellem's call for a conversation with radical democracy are outlined.

Keywords: Black theology; liberation theology; political theology; radical democracy; Vuyani Vellem.

Introduction

This article seeks to simultaneously examine a strange silence in reflections on the work of the late Vuyani Vellem, propose an alternative conversation on political theology in contemporary South African theology, and explore some work on radical democracy within Christian theology and its possible implications for a liberatory theology in today's South Africa.

In section Political theology in South Africa, I examine two recent contributions to political theology in South Africa, which both note public theology as the primary contemporary South African interlocutor for a global conversation on political theology. Section Vuyani Vellem turns the attention to a particular contribution of Vellem, which has so far escaped attention in the extensive reflections on his work, particularly since his untimely death – his proposal for a more explicit engagement with radical democracy by black theology of liberation made in the early 2010s. From this, I then look to radical democratic contributions to political theology in order to propose avenues of further exploring Vellem's underexplored nudge towards radical democracy.

Political theology in South Africa

Two recent overviews of political theology in South Africa situate this response and illustrate the alternative route that I wish to propose. First, the widely engaged article of Stephen Martin, and second Calvin Ullrich's recent introduction in the *Journal of Systematic Theology*.

Martin (2021) has recently reflected in detail on the cold reception to the talk of political theology in South Africa. While there is a clear reflection on the political situation in the history of South African theology, South African voices are largely missing from places such as journals under the name of political theology, introductory textbooks on the topic¹, or postgraduate studies explicitly positioning itself within the field of political theology. Dube's (2020) recent overview of African political theology (APT) also makes scant reference to South African theology, and briefly argues that South African liberation theologies differ on substantial points from the approach of those engaging more explicitly in APT. Calvin Ullrich's recent body of work, particularly his *Sovereignty*

1. De Gruchy's (2019) chapter on *Democracy* in *The Wiley Blackwell companion to Political Theology* is an exception.

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and *Event* (Ullrich 2021a) is a key counterpoint to this trajectory, and his first attempts to explicitly seek the connections between the radical political theology that is the focus of his study and South African black theology of liberation (Ullrich 2021b) makes important initial contributions.

On the one hand, an argument could be made that a more narrow and particular understanding of political theology should be expanded to include the more global reflection on theology, church, and its relation to the state (Rodriguez 2020). With little difficulty we would then be able to argue that South African anti-apartheid theologies and attempts at reimagining political and state organisation after apartheid would form part of this broad work of political theology. However, South African black and liberation theologies have an aversion against such universalising attempts at incorporating distinct approaches into a seemingly overarching whole.² As I will point out in the brief discussion of Vuyani Vellem further in the text, that is decidedly not the approach he would have taken. The argument is in no way an attempt to baptise black theology of liberation as political theology, but rather to enact one more staging of a conversation between different critical interrogations of our lives together amidst different forms of liberal democracies.

Following Martin's question around South African responses to political theology, Ullrich (2022) himself contributed with his introduction to political theology in South Africa in the *Journal of Systematic Theology*. Central to Martin's analysis is the stark difference between the silence of South African voices in the journal, *Political Theology* (and similar publications) versus the strong presence of South African voices in the *International Journal of Public Theology* (IJPT). Simultaneously, Martin notes the predominantly North Atlantic character of *Political Theology* compared to the more representative nature of the IJPT. For Martin (2021) 'the closest thing to political theology in South Africa is something that goes by the name, "public theology"', while Ullrich (2022:6) also sees public theology as the dominant (reformed) theological discourse on 'political theology'.

This is not necessarily about entering into a debate between political and public theology (Cavanaugh & Scott 2019), even if it might be relevant. Nor do I wish to entertain an argument around which theological discourse dominates post-apartheid South Africa. It is enough to take note of the fact that theologies of liberation in its various forms continue to be a significant part of the South African academic theological landscape.³ Martin (2021) proposes that political theology can make a critical contribution to South African public theology but does this at least in part through the overlaps between political theology and liberation theologies.

2. See for example the now classic critique of Tinyiko Maluleke to William Storrar's introduction to *Public Theology* (Maluleke 2011).

3. For a recent overview of some of these contributions see Van Wyngaard (2023).

Ullrich (2022:24–32) outlines three possible trajectories of political theology in South Africa, and as I will argue further in the text, Vellem does not seem to perfectly fit in any of these, but possibly outlines another alternative. First, Ullrich (2022:25) notes South African public theology as the dominant form that political theology took after apartheid yet spends ample time in outlining some of the (largely black and liberation theology) critiques regarding public theology's perceived 'affirmation of the relationship between theology and the liberal-economic status quo'. A critical public theology would be a middle-way between public and prophetic theology, and the most prominent South African possibility for Ullrich. His second and third possibilities draw more on his continental philosophical background than any tangible evidence of a broader South African appeal.⁴ Firstly, a South African derivative of Radical Orthodoxy presents a particular theo-political possibility. Secondly, a negative political theology for which no attempt is made in arguing for any South African examples, but is rather presented as a 'suggestion'. This latter 'suggestion' however perhaps best captures Ullrich's (2021a) own work on a radical political theology and his proposal that this, too, might be a possible future trajectory.

Rather than reading political theology as a potential critique of a positivist trajectory in public theology (including South African public theology), I want to add to Ullrich's (2021b) attempts at seeking convergence between political and liberation theologies and point to a potential convergence between South African liberation theologies, which represent an independent critique of the nation-state and its entanglement with a particular liberal-economic order as it took form after apartheid, and broader theo-political critiques, which may deepen this critical engagement. A possible point where this convergence manifests is in Vellem's (2013:8) black theological call for throwing in our lot with radical democracy.

Vuyani Vellem

Flowing from a south-south dialogue between South African and Brazilian theologians on public theology in 2012⁵, Vellem wrote a single engagement on radical democracy (Vellem 2015) and briefly mentioned it in another publication from the same time (Vellem 2013), which is the point of connection that I want to explore here. The 2015 article continues to be cited right into the present; however, when engaged, it is most for its introductory comments on the nature of liberation theology and its relationship to social theory (e.g. Mkheshu 2020:6) or his critique of Western democracy, which draws from the French rather than Haitian revolution (e.g. Kobo 2018:235). Vellem's brief exploration of a dialogue between black theology of liberation and radical democracy has, however, so far escaped attention.

4. The examples are, in the end, reflective of a particular white intellectual environment, in spite of the repeated references to the importance of liberation theology.

5. Vellem's contribution does not appear together with the conference outputs, but a series of publications from the same discussion was published as *Teologia Pública no Brasil e na África do Sul* (eds. Butelli, Le Bruys & Von Sinner 2014) and in English as half of the articles in Volume 43, No. 3 of *Missionalia*. (<https://missionalia.journals.ac.za/pub/issue/view/12>).

Even a brief reading should immediately observe a certain hesitancy in his engagement and provide a potential explanation for the silence around any further engagement. Vellem's final word on the matter is to seemingly remind of the limitation of an engagement between black theology of liberation and radical democracy, given the position of his radical democracy interlocutors in the West (2015:11–12).⁶ His own cautious engagement resembles Dube's (2020:650) more explicit dialogue with an admittedly western tradition of political theology. Without disregarding his caution, I do want to suggest that his brief exploration does open up a different route for a constructive dialogue between South African liberation theologies and political theology – in those places where the nature of the modern democratic state is being critically interrogated with an eye towards 'the people'. Vellem's engagement of radical democracy takes the form of a brief dialogue with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and likely does this at least in part via Anna Smith's 1998 publication on their work.⁷ However, what he does with the argument in dialogue with black theology of liberation in the second decade of the 21st century in South Africa is of interest.

His comments on radical democracy emerge from a critique of the economic developments in post-apartheid South Africa. There is a double-critique underpinning his call – first he sides with a critique of capitalism, stating as self-evident that a black theology of liberation would hold a socialist position. However, the same black theology of liberation calls forth a critique of the 'left' because of what he perceives as anti-democratic tendencies:

Clearly, the socialist project of equality cannot be abandoned; rather the anti-democratic antics of both the liberal and social discourses must be repudiated. Indeed, after 20 years of democracy, are there no signs of anti-democratic practices within the former liberation movements and organisations that were regarded as exponents of the liberation struggle? (Vellem 2015:12)

Vellem's concern is about more than balancing individual freedoms and social responsibility or democratic commitments and economic freedoms. Rather, he argues that economic justice cannot come about without the *democratic* inclusion of the poor. The preferential option for the poor driving his argument implies that a commitment to the poor should precede a commitment to an economic ideology. That does not imply an agnostic attitude to economic policy, but rather, that writing from an ideological commitment on the 'left', '[t]his task of unveiling anti-democratic practices, particularly in relation to our Leftist discourse, is urgent today' (Vellem 2015:12).

6.Vellem (2017) will in the years following this publication become increasingly insistent on disengaging from 'the West'.

7.The references in Vellem's radical democracy article are at times mistaken and at other times missing. The bibliography refers to Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, yet there is no reference to the work in the text. The text mentions Laclau and Mouffe's 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, yet it does not appear in the bibliography, and when quoting from the latter source a date of 2010 is provided – I have been unable to locate a 2010 edition. He does make use of Anna Smith's *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary*, which potentially forms his interpretation to some extent. I mention this as a further sign of the preliminary nature of the dialogue he proposed, but I do not attempt to reconstruct his use of various sources in this article.

In a 2013 article, mostly focused on the church's prophetic voice in the context of economic injustice, Vellem nods back to his forthcoming 2015 argument.⁸ His final advice to the church:

Let us throw our lot in radical democracy, deepening liberal politics and social democracy theoretically and intellectually rather than turning our positions into a faith devoid of reason that dismembers the poor. (Vellem 2013:8)

Again, these words came as a response to the failure of both the political left and the church to contribute to an economic alternative that will fundamentally transform the lives of the poor. And again, they come with an implicit wish for a theoretical grounding more rooted in Africa, while simultaneously drawing from a dialogue with radical democracy and others who can assist in theorising the shifts in the modern state in general, and the South African state in particular. There then seem to be two elements to his brief proposal that require attention; firstly, the commitment to building alliances with global theoretical work, which can assist in deepening our understanding of the state in post-apartheid South Africa, and secondly, revitalising the left through a radical democratic movement. In noting both the proposal, but also the way it is made, we should hear the need for a further dialogue among those thinking through questions of radical democracy and those exploring the continuation of South African liberation theologies outside of an influence over or control of statecraft.⁹

Proposals for a radical democracy

There is a potential condition to the proposed conversation that must however be noticed. As Robbins (2011:1) observed, much of political theology has been inherently antidemocratic. Where much of political theology derived from 'the idea of the sovereign and transcendent God' (2011:84), through the electoral process reproducing the same logic of sovereignty (2011:6), what is needed is 'an immanent political theology predicated on the constituent power of the multitude' (2011:84). That broader project, and particularly its engagement with the particularities of the South African state, is beyond the scope of this article. But some preliminary connections with Vellem's call for conversation can be made.¹⁰

As critically discussed, in spite of Vellem's call for a greater engagement with social theory, his own attention to the work of Laclau and Mouffe is rather limited. However, the work of Laclau and Mouffe, and their particular proposal on an

8.As mentioned above, this 2015 publication was presented at a 2012 conference, preceding the 2013 publication.

9.Perhaps relevant for my brief exploration below, by the time of his untimely death, Vellem was, among other things, chairperson of the board of the Church Land Programme, which sought a politics 'at a distance from the state' (Butler et al. 2010:3), given the way the post-apartheid state was drawn into an economic model at odds with the poor (Suderman 2017:327–333).

10.Ullrich (2021a) indicates that his own work on Caputo and radical theology does not move to focus on the 'modes of democratic politics' (p. 22) or the "praxis" of radical political theology' (p. 249), while also observing the potential between exploring the relation between liberation and radical theology (p. 17). Vellem's focus as black theology of liberation call us exactly towards this praxis, and for the sake of this argument, the praxis of radical democracy. From a different angle, it however also indicates the possibilities of exploring this relation between liberation and radical theologies in South Africa.

expansion on liberal politics and social democracy, is also not the only, or necessarily most appropriate, option on radical democracy. In the brief exploration presented further in the text, I therefore briefly explore two attempts at explicitly engaging radical democracy ecclesially as part of a brief attempt at looking at possible ways in which Vellem's proposal could be deepened.

Luke Bretherton's *Resurrecting Democracy* stands as a particularly helpful exploration of how the church can 'throw our lot in radical democracy' (Vellem 2013:8). Apart from questions around influence over statecraft post-apartheid, the church's other public role in the context of a breakdown in 'service delivery' has often been to step into those places where state social services have collapsed with works of development or charity. In a detailed study of London Citizens, Bretherton examines the role of religious organisations, not limited to churches, within broad-based community organisation. His focus is on the intersection between religious association and community organisation, how that works to review democracy, and how religious association 'limit[s] the power of market, state, and community over the individual' (Bretherton 2015:3). It is particularly the work of Saul Alinsky that informs his analysis, and of relevance here, the exploration of how religious communities may accompany communities in deciding what it is that they need, and in creating space where they can do things for themselves (2015:54).¹¹ Through the work with London Citizens, the work specifically seeks to point out how democratic citizenship can function in places other than – more local than or transcending the borders of – the nation-state, specifically the city in this case (2015:5).¹² This form of organising does not fundamentally reject either market or state – that is not the primary focus – but rather seeks to form a people that can ensure that their own voice and actions are an explicit factor in the forming of a place.

Al Barrett's PhD (2017) engages the radical democratic vision of Romand Coles, 'a sympathetic but non-Christian radical democrat' (Hauerwas & Coles 2008:3) for an ecclesial political theology. Here the focus is on how churches can embrace the gifts of their neighbours – for Barrett specifically those living on the urban margins, with his work drawing from a detailed narration of how a local congregation was drawn into community initiatives around theatre productions on the urban margins of east Birmingham. Barrett (2017:74, 127) finds in Coles, the political theorist, a critical voice in shifting ecclesial political theology from a posture of being formed around the church liturgy and flowing into 'the world' to being radically receptive to the voices of those on the margins of society. For Barrett (2017:149), following Coles, this implies a concrete bodily relocation of the theologian in order to actively listen, shifting from the primacy of speaking on behalf of, to

11. This is the 'iron rule' of community organising that Bretherton picks up from Alinsky: 'Never do for others what they can do for themselves' (Bretherton 2015:54).

12. Or even more specifically the neighbourhood (Bretherton 2015:55).

listening intently to the way people are already engaging with the material struggles they find themselves in (2017:180–181). Coles's own insistence on paying radically democratic attention to the silenced counter-voices may also serve as a reminder of the type of work that could extend Vellem's proposal within South African academic theology – investing our energy in carefully listening to those voices of struggle that less often make it into our bibliographies.¹³

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Human Sciences, Research Ethics Committee, No. 90181964_NOVEMBER_CREC_CHS_2023.

In search of conversation

For the moment, this is mostly a brief opening for a potential conversation between South African liberation theologies and political theology, particularly among those seeking for the overlaps between radical democratic visions and Christian theologies. I would by no means be the first to indicate that the quick call for an end to the liberation paradigm in South Africa overestimated the change that would come, and not least because of the way it allowed theology to be drawn into a project of nation-building that excluded the poor¹⁴ – made them into 'excesses of society' (Vellem 2015:10). The challenge of thinking through questions of global economics from within 'the most unequal country in the world', while simultaneously examining the place of the developmental state, representative democracy, constitutionalism, and the massive state mechanism in terms of its ability to either radically broaden the scope for people to have agency over their lives, or to reproduce the hierarchies, which keep a vast majority outside of any form of meaningful participation in their own future, will be key to the agenda of liberation theologies.¹⁵ In that project, we would need to simultaneously remain aware of the unique nature of governance in different contexts, while also recognising the need to be in dialogue with others who are theologically examining the changing nature of democracies in the 21st century.

Admittedly, this just sets the scene for engagement. But this scene opens up the vital place of 'the people' in the history of South African theology¹⁶, in tension with the sovereignty of the executive branch of government in the present. It also

13. Here I have in mind receptively noting the posture in Coles attempt to extend Cornel West's work with a more sustained exploration of the work of Ella Baker (Hauerwas & Coles 2008:45–86).

14. Alongside Maluleke's critique of Storrar's vision of public theology, see also Cochrane's (2011) poignant description of the voices that are not included.

15. I briefly outline elements of this agenda in the *Doing Liberation Theology in South Africa* (Van Wyngaard 2023:16–22).

16. The Kairos Document's portrayal as a 'people's document' is perhaps the most prominent example, in spite of the nuance that a historical reading should bring to this (Denis 2017). Similarly, while in hindsight the overly optimistic eschatological vision of a future South Africa in Albert Nolan's work can be observed (see Van Wyngaard 2019:208–228), his extensive engagement on the idea of 'the people' in *God in South Africa* (1988) reminds of a key concept in the history of South African liberation theologies.

brings into focus the way in which the church and theology has structured its role around the 'influence' over state power, on the one side, or an extension of the development work of the state or stepping into the gap of lack of state capacity, on the other side – all of this amid the sometimes barely hidden participation of the church in the factional battles of the political elite. Noting Ullrich's different possible threads for a South African political theology outlined earlier in the text, it is not clear that Vellem would have fitted any of them. I suspect that Vellem's proposal is a reminder of a South African prophetic tradition, but then one which cannot be read primarily as an attempt that seek to either influence or critique the state, but rather to develop a people's theology. It may draw from aspects of the negative political theology mentioned earlier, but quite deliberately seeks an indigenised and popular grassroots expression. Vellem's specific approach should include a reminder of a black consciousness tradition, which deliberately sought a politics, which would consider the state irrelevant and see as its primary tool a Freirean process of conscientisation of oppressed people.¹⁷ The implications of his sense that there is a possible shared commitment with radical democracy specifically is then exactly where I would propose a conversation would be possible. Yet, it is exactly the shared intellectual and conceptual space of South African liberal democracy and its counterparts elsewhere, with the critical theoretical interrogation, which is political theology's particular contribution that makes such a dialogue relevant. For Vellem, it was the brief probing of a dialogue with the radical democracy of Laclau and Mouffe, but perhaps for those who follow him more recent radical democratic contributions is where attention will have to be turned.

It is increasingly clear that this process of moving democracy outside of the persistent question of elected state power is perhaps more urgent today than a decade ago when Vellem made the proposal. The way the church has contributed to reducing the political to a question of state rule and democracy to questions of representative government need further critical interrogation. This at times included traditions of liberation theologies. Yet places where political theology is explored in close relation to radical democracy and community organising could hold potential for conversation with local quests for what might be significant in South Africa in the coming years, and where the church may need to find its place alongside other spheres of society: building people's movements and local democratic resilience to work for change. More conceptually and theologically, it would be clear that questions around presumed sovereignty of executive government, but perhaps even more of those who control the levers of capital, will require attention, together with how that can be countered in our understandings of the place of the people – particularly those relegated to the edges of modern society.

17. Compare Bretherton's (2015:113) description of 'consciousness-raising' in London Citizens with the place of similar consciousness raising in early black consciousness (Magaziner 2010:129–130).

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