

VAIHARAI

(The Dawn)

A Theological Half-Yearly

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Civil Society and the Church

There has been a great interest during the last couple of decades, both in the academic as well as in the activist circles, on the discourse on civil society. Many seminars and conferences are being organized on the relevance and significance of civil society and more and more literature is coming out on the same theme. This recent trend has generated more hope that a robust civil society will help the socially concerned people and organisations to forge an alliance to address many social issues and problems. Church being one of the agents in civil society, in this issue of *Vaiharai* we try to understand the nature of civil society and envision how the Church can effectively fulfil its role and collaborate with other agents of social transformation in civil society.

A project that envisages a close network and collaboration between different organisations and institutions in civil society calls at the very outset for a clear understanding of the nature of civil society. An investigation on the different meanings of civil society ever since these two terms were employed in the political discourses will help us to understand the nature and quality of civil society today. Hence in the first article I present the historical development of this concept as it was unpacked in different political traditions, particularly in the liberal and Marxian traditions. This study aims at helping the reader to understand better the contemporary discourses on civil society.

Describing the characteristics of civil society as a sphere of freedom, a milieu of consensus-building, a force of resistance and a field of power-struggle as understood in contemporary discussions, Felix Wilfred argues that civil society in general, particularly civil society in India is not a level field but a site of ambiguity, because it is a site wherein even diametrically opposed forces can comfortably coexist and thrive. In