

Religion and Civil Society:

Towards an Interface

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Introduction

As the title itself suggests, the main concern of this article is to search for an interface between religion and civil society. This is done with a view to promoting an increased interaction between religion and other institutions in civil society. This interaction, I believe, will open up a space for the institutions in the civil society to engage in a collective search to construct common good.

The major portion of this investigation deals with an overview of the development of the concept of civil society over the past few centuries, particularly in the liberal and Marxist tradition. Having analysed different layers of meanings of the concept of civil society, it also examines a particular meaning of religion that would serve as the interface between religion and civil society. Hence the nature of this paper is more of sociological than theological. The main aim of this conceptual survey is to help one understand the discussion on civil society in the contemporary political science.

1. Civil Society in the Liberal Tradition

The time span of the liberal tradition is between Thomas Hobbes and the-Hegelian period (roughly seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Since the meaning of the term "civil society" in relation to the nature of the state differs significantly within the liberal tradition, in light of those meanings I subdivide liberal tradition into two sections: civil society in the early liberal tradition or contractarianism and civil society in the later liberal tradition.

1.1 Civil Society in the Early Liberal Tradition

The term "civil society" understood in contemporary political science as "the field of contestation, propertied with rights", was not common before the commencement of the liberal tradition in the seventeenth century.

John Locke (1632-1704) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the architects and the articulators of the early version of liberalism, known as contractarianism, introduced the term "civil society" for the first time in the history of political thought. In order to avert the threat to human's right to self-preservation, the contractarians proposed that everyone should give up their natural rights and liberties and create and enter into an organised and rule-bound society called civil or political society.¹

Thus, civil society is artificially constructed by men and women by entering into contracts in which they lose some of their natural liberty and by which they gain civil rights rooted in the natural law.² Since the rights of the individuals are grounded in the natural law, not even the state has the power to deny such rights but has the responsibility to protect them.³ Through juridical enforcement, the state exercises its coercive power in order to protect the rights of the individual. In other words, the state remains subsidiary to and derivative of civil society. Yet there exists a dialectical relationship between both.

However, the succeeding political economists in the early liberal tradition gave a totally different picture of civil society while retaining some of the basic premises in the political thoughts of the contractarians.⁴

Civil society, as envisioned by Adam Smith, is devoid of any conflict and ensures progress for all. It is self-regulating on account of the rational pursuit of self-interest. The rational pursuit of self-interest brings more cohesion into the society, augments the division of labour and enhances productivity.⁵ Civil society is also benevolent since the

¹ It is better to keep in mind that the contractarians did not distinguish the civil from the political as they were preoccupied with differentiating the state of nature from the civil society. It is very evident from the fact that Locke uses both civil society and political society interchangeably. See JOHN LOCKE, "Political or Civil Society," in *Two Treatises on Civil Government* (London: Dent, 1970) 54-178.

² JOHN LOCKE, "Political or Civil Society," 121.

³ JOHN LOCKE, *Two Treatises on Civil Government*, 184-85.

⁴ NEERA CHANDHOKE, *State and Civil Society: Exploration in Political Theory* (New Delhi: Sage, 1995), 77-88).

⁵ For the classical political economy, an individual is principally a self-interested economic being. First, by nature man is self-interested. Second, as the production moves on from the household to a wider context in the wake of capitalism, the market mediates the interaction between an individual and the others instead of

progress of an individual results in the progress of all.⁶ Since civil society is steered by the pursuit of personal self-interest, which in turn does not create any conflict, it does not need to be brought under any planned direction by human beings. Thus civil society enjoyed a privileged position in the theoretical framework of the classical political economics.

This notion of civil society had a significant and far-reaching impact on the relationship between politics and economics. Politics was totally dichotomized from economics; still worse, politics was demoted.⁷ Civil society was almost identified with economic activities. Such a relationship between politics and economics; in turn, institutionalised a complete separation between the civil society and the state, and moreover, the subsidiary state became subservient to civil society. The undesirable consequence of such separation from the state was that it became non-interventionist and merely welfare-oriented.⁸ Thus in the early liberal tradition civil society was conceived as a negative space meaning that state does not interfere in its functioning.

1.2 Civil Society in the Later Liberal Tradition

Later liberals such as J.S. Mill and Alexis De Tocqueville introduced three domains in society, namely the state, civil society and the region of independent economic activity. They infused the new blood of “associationalism” into civil society. Thus they redeemed and reinvigorated the dialectical relationship between civil society and the state.

According to De Tocqueville, the role of the state as conceived by the early liberal tradition was to regulate civil society with minimal

family and community. In the market one producer meets the need of the other producer. Through the market one fulfills one's own self-interest by fulfilling the interests of the others. The space where this transaction takes place is civil society.

⁶ ADAM SMITH, *The Wealth of Nations*, R. H. CAMPBELL (ed.), vol. 1, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) 343.

⁷ As quoted in R. L. MEEK, *Smith, Marx and After: Ten Essays on the Development of Economic Thought* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1977) 26.

⁸ A welfare state, in the paradigm of classical political economy, is expected to lay down laws by which it can protect the life, liberty and property of its citizens and in the event of violation of such laws it should administer a system of justice. It should also provide public works and amenities. But it can neither define the parameters of a good life and the collective good nor can it intervene in the economic activities of its citizens.

power and thereby to enhance civil society. But he was convinced that instead of enhancing civil society, the state began to stifle it.⁹ To keep the power of the state under check he suggested the necessity of plural interacting associations. He called such associations the “independent eye” of the society. These associations are intermediary associations between the state and right-bearing individuals. It is left to the personal choices of the individual whether to join or keep away from such associations. This kind of arrangement safeguards the personal freedom of the individuals and guarantees the constant renewal of the civil society as well.

The salient feature of later liberalism is that it neither dismisses the state nor reduces the state’s function to the minimum as in the previous traditions of thought. On the contrary, it accepts the full power of the state to intervene to enforce law and order in the modern and complex society. All that liberalism aims at is to control the state when it transgresses its limit.

The Achilles’ heel of this tradition is that it failed to problematise civil society which is also the hotbed of extensive fragmentation on account of different kinds of inequalities. It was Hegel, Marx and Gramsci who uncovered the conflicts and contradictions found in the civil society. Now let us turn to Hegel to hear his view of civil society.

2. Hegel’s Civil Society

Having witnessed contradictions, conflicts, fragmentation and inequalities in the industrialized society in which he was living, Hegel was disenchanted with conceptualization of civil society by the liberal tradition. Hence he reconceptualised civil society not merely as a space wherein economic activities are organized but primarily as an ethical community which can train and animate the otherwise self-seeking individuals to acquire a moral vision which is universal in perspective. In his scheme of things, the state, with the intermediary institutions in civil society, will reconcile the forces of conflicts, contradictions and inequalities in the society. However for a couple of reasons civil society could not play the role he envisaged.

⁹ ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. H. KEENE, (New York: The Colonial Press, 1900) 117. As quoted in NEERA CHANDHOKE, *State and Civil Society*, 108.

First, in his theoretical construction, civil society is not a self-conscious entity. On the contrary it is a subsidiary to the state, or, in other words it is at the service of the state. This is so, because what the civil society does is to educate the self-seeking and self-serving individuals to accept the discourses of the state and thus to enable its members to gain universal perspectives transcending particularities. Consequently, the civil society can neither create nor sustain an independent and alternative public discourse other than the state's. Hence Chandhoke comments: "Thus ultimately civil society is subordinated to the state and the individual to the whole ... The Hegelian concept of civil society instead of becoming the theater of history, becomes the appendage of the state."¹⁰

Second, the actors in the arena of civil society, or those who are the members of the corporations,¹¹ are the propertied class people. The working class and the poor are denied this status. It is evident from the following words of Hegel.

"To hold that every single person should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern on the ground that all individuals are members of the state, that its concerns are their concerns, and that it is their right that what is done should be done with their knowledge and volition, is tantamount to a proposal to put the democratic element without any rational form into the organism of the state."¹²

On the one hand, he denies the right of the working class to participate in the country's politics. On the other hand, Hegel creatively

¹⁰ NEERA CHANDHOKE, *State and Civil Society*, 130.

¹¹ The membership of the business class is determined by the very fact of engaging in trade and business. This class is marked by particularity and self-seeking activities and therefore it is not universal in itself. To reach universality, it needs to be tutored through membership in corporations. Corporations, for Hegel, are the second ethical institutions after the family, because they are modes of moral socialisation, educating the self-seeking individuals into a spirit of universality. Corporations, according to Hegel, as the integrative institutions, are superior to the family since they help the individuals to transcend their own interests and to embrace the common good. This is the reason why Hegel comments that "its [corporation's] right is to come on the scene like a second family for its members." See HEGEL, G.W.F., *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. KNOX, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942) par. 252.

¹² HEGEL, G.W.F., *Philosophy of Right*, par. 308.

and conveniently reduces civil society to the corporations in his claim that the members of the legislature and the state administration are the deputies of the corporations.¹³ This elitist notion of participation which condescends popular democracy does not reckon with the working class people as actors in the theater of history. It means that none of their concerns is taken into consideration by the conflict-resolving state. This is, in fact, against the very philosophy of Hegel which attempts to reconcile the interests of every particularity with that of the universal. It is also in contrast with the very ethicality of the state. How can the state be universal when the interests of a section of people are not heeded? In the history of theorisation of the civil society it is Marx, who comes after Hegel, who will conceive civil society as the theater of history, and identify new actors in that theater.

3. Marx and Civil Society

Basically Marx inherited from Hegel the normative assessment that civil society is infested with egoism, selfishness, competing and unequal particularities, and fragmentation. We must transcend these particularities and antinomies. Also, though he employed Hegelian analysis for studying the society, he radically differed from Hegel in his conclusion. This is because, first, he affirmed that the conflicts of civil society must be resolved from within civil society and not by the state. Second, he analysed the conflicts of civil society from the perspective of the working class.

To affirm that the conflict of civil society must be resolved from within civil society, Marx first dismantles the artificially created separation between state and civil society by Hegel. He asserts that since the state itself, which is represented by the representatives of the corporations and estates, has its own interests and priorities, it is nothing but a part of civil society. It, therefore, cannot reconcile the conflicts of the civil society but will only augment them. That is why, unlike Hegel, Marx points out that the solutions to the problems of civil society should be found within the same domain and not from outside. It is civil society which has to be transformed before the transformation of the state. Thus Marx rescues civil society from the clutches of the state and reinstates it

¹³ HEGEL, G.W.F., *Philosophy of Right*, par. 311.

in its original place as articulated by the liberal tradition. That is why he calls civil society the "theater of history."¹⁴

After restoring civil society to its original place, Marx directs his axe against civil society. He investigates the very terrain of civil society itself. Marx, in line with Hegel and the liberals, agrees with the view that the modern civil society provides avenues for optimal self-realisation of individuals. But the same modern civil society, argues Marx, is the hotbed of innumerable vices which paralyse the majority population from attaining self-realisation. In such cases, for Marx, civil society is more counter-productive than productive and therefore it has to be transcended together with the state through revolution. Now the question is, who is the protagonist of the revolution which aims at the transformation of civil society and ultimately the disappearance of the state?

The working class, according to Marx, is the agent of the transformation of civil society. Marx and Hegel could arrive at different conclusions because their perspectives were different. "Hegel discusses the poor from the perspective of civil society; Marx criticises civil society from the perspective of the poor."¹⁵ Marx evaluates civil society from the perspective of the working class and reconstructs the discourse on civil society from the vantage point of their emancipation. This perspective helped him to elevate the working class from non-members to members of civil society. He entrusted the historical task of transforming and ultimately transcending civil society to the working class because that is the class, according to him, which has the capacity to carry out this mission.

4. Gramsci and Civil Society

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, draws inspiration from Hegel and builds on Marx, bringing to the fore a new and most important and hitherto undiscovered dimension of civil society. In the history of political thought, civil society as the site of contestation gains currency and gathers a momentum in Gramsci's discourse on the relationship between

¹⁴ KARL MARX, *German Ideology*, in ALLEN W. WOOD, *Marx Selections* (London: Macmillan Publications, 1988) 99.

¹⁵ MARCUSE, E. S., *Emancipation and Consciousness* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 24-25.

state and civil society. In Gramsci's assessment, the trenches of civil society in the then Italian society were occupied by the Church with its many cultural institutions to the extent that liberalism could not hegemonise it. This prompts Gramsci, more in line with Marx's critique of Hegel's separation of the state and civil society, to postulate that civil society and the state are, to be sure, two different terrains but both permeated with interests of which the state takes advantage. While the civil society develops its own institutions, the state instrumentalises them—through coercion—and in doing so tries to procure for itself legitimacy.

Therefore, ultimately it is the parasitical state which shapes the contours of civil society and its related institutions with the purpose of gaining a public consent. Therefore the question of ideologies is very important. This observation led Gramsci to make a thorough inquiry into the nature of civil society which for him is more of a social and cultural space than an economic space and must therefore be located in the superstructure.

Gramsci's civil society is primarily superstructural but not devoid of any significance that comes to bear on the base. "It is superstructural because it pertains to the sphere of ideological and political practices. It is also structural inasmuch as it is the site where the fundamental classes of society, viz., the capitalists and the proletarians express their experiences in these practices."¹⁶ In other words, it is also structural because he underlined that the indirect confrontation between labour and capital takes place in civil society conceived as a cultural-political domain.¹⁷ Understood thus, by civil society Gramsci means, "The political and cultural hegemony which a social group exercises over the whole of society, as the ethical content of the State."¹⁸

Hegemony, for Gramsci, is a domineering organisational principle which coordinates a complex reality so as to generate consent. An organisational principle is a principle which brings together different

¹⁶ NEERA CHANDHOKE, *State and Civil Society*, 149.

¹⁷ WALTER ADAMSON, "Gramsci and the Politics of Civil Society," *Praxis International* 7 (1987 & 1988) 325.

¹⁸ ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *Passato e Presente* (Turin: 1966) 164, as quoted in NORBERTO BOBBIO, "Gramsci and the Concept of Civil Society, 84.

fragmented parts by infusing a sense of unity among them and therefore is capable of creating a moral vision. For Gramsci, this moral vision or hegemony smoothens the process of domination and elicits consent among the masses. In any given society, especially in a capitalistic society, the ruling class carves out the contours of this vision with a view to mystify and justify its political dominance and economic interests.¹⁹ This moral vision structures the consciousness of the individual to receive the legitimacy of the state actively. That is why Gramsci maintains that hegemony is a fact of consciousness and of knowledge.²⁰

Moreover, hegemony is not static but a dynamic process. It is an ongoing construction. It can not be constructed and left to fend for itself. If hegemony structures the consciousness of the individuals, it should be done both before and after one seizes power. This dynamic process implies that a war of position must be fought on the ideological terrain leading to a war on the political and economic domain. Thus he conceives civil society as the arena of struggles and contestation. Hence, for Gramsci “the counterhegemony” or “the new culture” must be engineered on the ideological terrain. It is my contention, in line with this Gramscian tradition, that exactly on this cultural domain religion has an enormous opportunity to interact and collaborate with the other agents of culture production. Drawing insights from C. Geertz’s understanding of religion I substantiate my arguments in the following pages.

5. Religion as a Meaning System

Geertz’s understands culture basically as a pattern of meanings embodied and expressed in symbols and symbolic forms. In understanding and appropriating those meanings the processes of “individuation,” and “socialisation” takes place. Religion, too, as an effective cultural system, does the same job. That is why he defines religion thus:

A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these

¹⁹ JAQUES TEXIER, “Gramsci, the Theoretician of the Superstructures,” 64-65.

²⁰ “The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and a method of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact.” ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *Prison Note Book*, 365-66.

conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²¹

Religion in its essence, for Geertz, speaks of ultimate meanings in life through sacred symbols that “synthesise a people’s ethos - the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood - and their world view - the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.”²² The ethos and worldviews are mutually related in that they reinforce each other. Ethos supplies intellectual credibility to a particular way of life projected as an ideal. The world-view provides an emotional accent to this ethos by presenting a picture in which it is harmoniously integrated within the present state of affairs.

Thus, religion, a cultural system made of sacred symbols, operates primarily at the level of “meaning” in human life. It provides hope even in the most hopeless situations, not by denying the existence of the hopeless situations in the world, but by denying their rightful and legitimate place in the world. This is done, according to Geertz, through religious symbolism: “It is in terms of religious symbolism, a symbolism relating man’s sphere of existence to a wider sphere within which it is conceived to rest, that both the affirmation and the denial are made.”²³ Affirmation and denial are carried out in the wider “order of existence” as it is designed and projected by religion. Moreover, religion arouses a powerful motivation and mood in a believer through sacred symbols that make them adhere to that “order of existence.” Thus religion is a cultural system that forms human beings by providing meaning for the events of life and by creating long-lasting moods and motivations in them to hold on to those meanings.

Geertz’s notion of culture is predominantly cognitive and ideational, though he admits that an influence of social structures on cultural structures and vice versa is possible.²⁴ In my appropriation of Geertz’s reading of religion as a cultural system, I extend the meaning of

²¹ CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Fontana Press, 1993) 90.

²² CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.

²³ CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 108.

²⁴ CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 169.

culture to cover both the ideational and material aspect of it. Culture is not a finished product but a (meandering) product in process. Moreover, my perspective sees religion as a cultural system of meaning, the core of which is not merely transmitted but ever created and re-created through new and even conflicting 'readings' of cultural symbols and cultural forms.

Drawing inspiration from Gramsci and Geertz I would argue that it is an urgent and most relevant task of the Church to collaborate with other religions, ideologies and new social movements in civil society to challenge the cultures that indirectly support the marginalization and exclusion of the majority from the mainstream society and to create and recreate meaning systems that would passionately advocate life in fullness. Of course in this process the Church should also renew itself inexorably to purge itself of the cultural elements that it attempts to eradicate in society. Only then it can be a credible interlocutor in civil society.

Today we are living in a "complex society" characterized by a shift in accent from material production to the "production of signs and social relations."²⁵ It means that today's society spends much of its resources in constructing cultures that would justify a particular form of social relations. This becomes evident from the fact that 46% of the USA GNP and 53% of the income is produced by the information industry.²⁶ In fact in the past centuries the Church had been in the forefront through its many institutions in generating and disseminating cultures. But now "Hollywood, CNN and Disneyland are more influential than Vatican, the Bible or the public relations rhetoric..."²⁷ Hence it is all the more important for the Church to make its presence felt in civil society in order to build

²⁵ Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 45.

²⁶ Roberto Verzola, "Globalisation, The Third World and the Media," paper presented at the *International Conference on colonialism to Globalisation: Five Centuries after Vasco da Gama* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, February 2-6, 1998).

²⁷ James Petras, "Cultural Imperialism in Late 20th Century," in *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (1994) 2070.

up cultures that promote and enhance life, specially the life of the marginalized and excluded.

Conclusion

At the beginning stage of the liberal tradition civil society was artificially constructed as a space in which the right-bearing and self-seeing individuals can engage in economic transactions with the minimum intervention from the state, the regulatory agency. In the course of time civil society came to be understood only as a space of economic activity, in which state had no power to intervene, though in practice state intervened in the functioning of the civil society. Against this backdrop, Marxian tradition conceived civil society as an arena wherein cultural hegemony is constantly moulded and remoulded to elicit consent from the public towards maintaining political and economic dominance of the powerful. To destabilise this dominance, it was argued, counter hegemony should be built up. In this task of building up counter hegemony and consensus building religion has an ample opportunity to collaborate with other agencies of similar interest in civil society.