

## **Civil Society - A Site of Ambiguities: *Implications for Christian Engagement Today***

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Fr. Felix Wilfred, Department of Christian Studies,  
Madras University, Chennai.

A general disenchantment with the state and political governance has made more and more people turn to civil society with a lot of hope.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the political left and the right invoke civil society as an important sphere of political praxis today. Similarly, global capitalism has become a supporter of civil society, no less than the advocates of socialist economy. This already is an indication of the ambiguity that surrounds the concept and the institution of civil society.<sup>2</sup> For, if diametrically opposed ideologies set such a high value on civil society, obviously, they understand different things by the same concept, and the motives for promoting it cannot be the same.<sup>3</sup>

The present article wants to inquire into the many ambiguities the concept and institution of civil society have been subjected to, so as to understand it more closely in all its intricacies and nuances as it is employed today. This can serve to reach a better understanding of the prospects it presents and the perils of manipulation it is open to. After having explored in this way the concept of civil society both in its conceptual and the ambiguous operational level, we will then enquire as to the implications it has for the engagement of the Church today. The presupposition here is that the Church is an integral part of the civil society, and as such is expected to be active with other units and components in the public sphere.

### **A Sphere of Freedom**

Why civil society has proved a general attraction is due to the fact that it represents a realm of freedom both in its genesis as well as in its present day praxis. In the period when this concept came to the fore, thinkers on civil society saw that it provided a space of freedom from centralized authority like the kings and rulers. While regal and imperial mode of governance reduced the people to mere subjects of the sovereign, the civil society was a breather: It addressed the subjectivity of the

people and brought about a change from an exclusive relationship of the subject to the ruler to a relationship among the peoples themselves.<sup>4</sup> It opened the space for the subjectivity of the people to enter into inter-subjective relationships by creating various forms of social association. In the present-day circumstances, the freedom of civil society is understood as a situation of non-coercion either on the part of the state or the market. These are the two most dominant forces, which encroach upon the civil society and try to control it. Both are detrimental to the ideal civil society represents.

### **A Milieu of Consensus-Building**

To be able to conduct societal life and foster harmonious inter-human relationships we require understanding among the individuals, groups and identities represented in a particular polity. Viewed from this perspective, civil society is a field in which there takes place a harmonizing of self-interests and the common good. This is important if the law of the jungle is to be prevented among human beings. Civil society is then a rational ordering of the society, as is becoming of human persons, in such a way that there results a milieu for the flowering of each human person as well as the fostering of common good. Mutual agreement, understanding and consensus building can take place when there is a free flow of information, exchange of ideas and views and free expressions of opinions on all matters that pertain to societal living. In this way, civil society will facilitate consensus-building. Civil society in a way relativizes the various positions and opens up the possibility of acknowledging and appreciating the viewpoints of others in an effort to build up the vision of a shared common good. Through a process of giving and taking, sharing and learning, common good becomes more easily attainable.

In the Western tradition, civil society as a sphere of mutuality emerged in the seventeenth century and it was fostered by the publication of journals, pamphlets, tea and coffee-shops, and market-places where people met and discussed and debated public issues. This bourgeois civil society whose birth was assisted by the Enlightenment is viewed by contemporary thinkers like Jürgen Habermas as ideal times of civil society, which, according to him, has suffered a decline by the intervention of many external factors and forces, not the least the state and the market.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Force of Resistance**

Civil society has the potential to challenge the powers that be, and to hold accountable the state and all public institutions. Precisely the power civil society represents led to its revival in 1980s when many nations in different parts of the world, especially in Eastern Europe, were faced with strongly centralized and authoritarian states. While individual citizens feel overwhelmed by the power of the state machinery and its intrigues, collective deliberation and action could become a force of resistance to the prevailing political and economic order. Very often, then, civil society becomes the home for new social movements which, among other things, exert pressure on the state and the market. An active civil society could become so powerful, that, not in few cases it could dislodge even the ruling power. This is what happened with the "velvet revolution" of 1989 in Eastern Europe. Other examples are the peoples' power in the Philippines which brought together concerned citizens whose decisive intervention brought to an end the authoritarian regime of Marcos.<sup>6</sup> We have many examples of the active civil society mobilizing popular support and overthrowing dictatorial regimes.

In everyday practice the resistance may take on a critical approach vis-à-vis the state. There is the need for perpetual vigilance lest the state should betray the people and the common good.<sup>7</sup> Hence, it becomes an important duty of the civil society to hold the state accountable for its commissions and omissions. Civil society and its functioning takes place not only at macro-level institutions and structures of governance (state, parliament, state-assemblies, etc.), but also at the local level of panchayats. By holding the democratically elected representatives and the institutions of governance accountable, the civil society exercises its critical function. This critical function goes even further to include the law-enforcing machinery like the police and to check that they commit no violation of human rights.

### **A Field of Power-Struggle**

A fourth dimension of civil society has to do with power. Here we enter into the inner composition of the civil society and the dynamics of its operation. It would be wrong to assume that civil society is a level-field in which citizens discourse together, interact and intervene in the public sphere on an equal footing. This is too an idealistic picture. But

the reality is that civil society is characterized by an asymmetry of power. Individuals and groups in the civil society are made of many ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. For example, politically there could be a powerful majority group in conflict with minority groups, or a dominant minority group repressing a powerless majority. From the economic point of view, there could be the case of powerful elitist groups exploiting the marginalized who are struggling for their survival. Furthermore, the civil society could become a battle-ground for ideologies. A particular ethnic, linguistic or religious group may want to impose its world-view and culture on the rest of the citizens. Instead of solidarity, hierarchal as well as patriarchal powers are at work in the civil society, and it often presents a picture of conflict and division. As Neera Chandhoke rightly notes,

For if civil society consists of associational life per se, then we have to accept that associations of every stripe and hue exist in this space. Patriarchal forces exist alongside feminist groups, religious fascists exist along with movements against communalism, class oppression exists alongside groups fighting for redistributive justice, and pro-state associations that further and strengthen the dominant project of society exist alongside groups that challenge the legitimacy of the state. Some further civic engagement, others inhibit it; some expand the domain of civil society by bringing in formerly disadvantaged groups, others debar these groups from civic life.<sup>8</sup>

To be able to understand this aspect of civil society, we need to free ourselves from the dominant western conception of nation-states as homogeneous entities made up of autonomous individual citizens having the same dignity and all of them having the same rights and duties. In this liberal understanding of state and society, civil society becomes the association of free individuals. But the point is that this conception does not reflect the Indian reality of already existing groups on the basis of language, caste, religion etc. The same thing could be said also in general about the Asian situation. Civil society cannot be considered independent of these primordial collective realities which affect every aspect of life in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

[T]he attempt to establish a civil society in India is recent, beginning in the colonial period. As a result, traditional values and attitudes arising from its segmented and hierarchical society, as well as

modern values based on equality, rights and justice that are enshrined in the Constitution coexist in uneasy relationship. Particularly relevant... is the existence of caste hierarchy, due to which civil society in India is a complex space where different caste groups with differing social values and ritual status often come into conflict, as much with each other as with the state. Moreover, due to rapid social change, the relationship between these social groups is unstable and fluid, making civil society an arena of contestation among them.<sup>10</sup>

This explains why a civil society of such desperate groupings with strong emotional bonds and divergent interests could turn out to be a real battleground. In other words, in India, as well as in many developing countries, the question of civil society is more than reconciling individual interests and common good; it is more than dialogue among different ideologies and world-views and conceptions about good life. The crucial question in India is that of reconciling the various identities and their interests and the pursuit of common good. Moreover, the relationship between the state and civil society is compounded in India by the fact that the castes and the elitist groups that dominate the civil society are also in effect those who control the state.

### **Distinct and yet Confused**

Having dealt with the various angles from which civil society could be viewed, we want to now examine some of the ambiguities characterizing the civil society. The first dilemma civil society faces is the claim of being a distinct "Third Sphere", independent of the state and the market, and at the same time the deep entanglement of politics and economy in the civil society. There is a long tradition that has affirmed the independence of civil society to such an extent as to consider it as its distinguishing feature. For example, Alexis de Tocqueville extolled the well-functioning civil society in America as an independent sphere involving the active participation of the citizens, while lamenting the absence of it in his native France. Independence of civil society, according to him, was destroyed both by monarchy and by revolution. Today there are theoreticians who hold that civil society is a distinct concept, well demarcated from politics and the market. Members of the civil society may enter into politics and in economic transactions, but per se, civil society does not include economics and politics.<sup>11</sup> Such a

delinking follows a general outlook which insulates the various spheres of experiences and fails to take into account the interconnectedness and linkages that exist among the various spheres. Such is the case also of civil society, which cannot be separated from other areas of life.

We realize the dilemma involved in civil society by taking note of the fact that a civil society, despite the claims of being a third sphere, cannot function without the state.<sup>12</sup> The state, in fact, confers a certain stability to the manifold social relationships in the civil society and, at least in theory, guarantees a juridical order with which rights of individuals and groups in a civil society could be guaranteed and protected. This is a point with which Hegel was so taken up that he went to the extent of absorbing the civil society within an all-embracing state. Even if we do not go to that extent, we need to admit that state is a sine qua non for the civil society and its functioning. The powers invested in the state are such that it can control the civil society by supporting those associational forms that are pliable to its ends and suppressing others. On the other hand, as an ideally independent sphere, civil society is expected to hold in check the state and make it accountable to the citizens who involve themselves collectively for the common good. Here is then a realm of dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions.

### **Strong but Vulnerable**

The whole idea of civil society is a picture of strength, especially if we view it as a site of resistance. It has functioned, and in many cases continues to function, as a centre crystallizing the various social forces. At the same time, the sphere of civil society is today vulnerable and is exposed to hijacking by market forces. In fact, this corrosion of what is supposed to be the bulwark of the people is happening all over the world. Whereas civil society is supposed to be a realm where people can come to their own and exercise their agency, which includes also the economic sphere, it undergoes a manipulation by the market which controls the civil society in various ways. It does it, first, by exercising control over the state and its machinery; second, it weakens civil society through manipulating the media and thus the popular consciousness. It contributes to the development of a highly individualized self incapable of associational life, except entering into market-interactions that maximize self-interests in terms of profit, acquisition of political power and cultural

hegemony. These commercial interactions do not create any real bondedness, going beyond pragmatic interests.

The ambiguity and vulnerability of civil society can be observed also in its inner dynamics and functioning. While civil society could play an active role in restraining the state from excesses and exerting pressure to perform its duties to the people, it is also open to internal divisions. The internal division becomes highly problematic when it is the case of one marginalized group and its interests pitted against another marginalized group. That is why civil society has the double task of both democratizing the state as well as itself.<sup>13</sup>

### **Secular but Dealing with Religious Identities**

The ambiguities of civil society become even more evident when it is related to the religious realm. Civil society conjures up the image of secularity. If people have to come together in associational life for the pursuit of common good, it is normal to expect that their religious belonging be not played up, but rather set aside. The assumption here is that religions are bound to cause conflict and dissension, which will be counterproductive to the harmony civil society is supposed to foster. This view of religion as disturbing the realm of civil society is based on the experience of the past as well as present times. Another presupposition is that with the advent of modernity, there takes place a decline of religion. Taking a step further, it is assumed that taking distance from religion itself is an indicator of modernization. Hence there is enough substance to the argument that a civil society could function effectively only in a secular milieu where religion is kept out of bounds.

Moreover, there is a fear that religious convictions and world-views with their penchant for absolutizing could jeopardize the freedom of civil society. Especially if religious views of one or other group is imposed on others, it would represent a real threat to civil society and its functioning. In India some thinkers like T.N.Madan and Ashis Nandy have challenged a secular view of the public realm in which religion is excluded. The substance of their argument is that this is a western concept, which is not applicable to India.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, their reflections do not go anywhere much beyond making the polarity between East and West in considering this matter. While their insight is right, their argument

is quite limited and even defective and suffers from many false presuppositions.

We need to go further and raise critical questions. Is it true that the common good is best served if civil society is insulated from the influence of religion? Are we to assume that religions do not have anything to contribute to the goals of the civil society, in whichever way it is conceived – as a realm of freedom, of resistance, of struggle, etc.? This does not seem to be the case. It could be evidenced from factual considerations and from theoretical perspectives. In many nations, including Eastern Europe, religion has functioned as a rallying point for the resistance against authoritarian regimes. From a theoretical perspective, not seldom the very motivation for active involvement for the other and engagement for common good could derive from religious convictions in which case, it cannot be excluded from the realm of civil society; on the contrary, its valuable resources – its ideals of a harmonious life as well as the quest for justice and equality couched in symbols and metaphors, narratives, etc. - could become highly enriching to the life of the civil society. In short, the ambiguity of civil society here is one between a secular conception of civil society and another conception which sees civil society not necessarily as counterpoised to religious affiliation.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, it is a conflict between safeguarding the freedom of civil society from religious sources, and at the same time enriching civil society through religious sources.

### **Private Becomes Public**

What we have said, leads us to review critically the precariousness of the traditional distinction between the private and the public. I mean to say that the relegation of religion as a private matter with no role in the public realm of civil society raises the general problematic of the inter-relationship between the public and the private.

The private is supposed to be a protected area of another order of relationships than the one prevailing in the associational life of the public realm. The most common example cited for the private is the family. One may not apply the mode of relationships between husband and wife, parents and children to that of the public sphere. It is the same logic that is applied to religion, which, like the family, governs the relationships, preferences and choices an individual may have. Like the epistemological

distinction between "subjective" and "objective" has been exploded, so too any neat distinction between the private and the public stands challenged today. As a matter of fact, many problems and issues considered as private are matters of common interest and concern. For example, domestic violence cannot be justified on the plea that it takes place in the private sphere; for the violence against women is a public matter whether it happens in the family or in the public work-place. More broadly, the protection of the dignity and rights of individuals is something that cannot be done privately; it is something of public nature. On the other hand, the private realm cannot remain today insulated from the public. For, we note how politics and market affect the sphere of the family and makes serious inroads into this realm and undermines the freedom supposed to be enjoyed in the private sphere.

Coming back to religion, since its beliefs, convictions and modes of praxis affect the society, they have a clear public and societal character. It is difficult to deny this. Religion has a public role today, and herein lies the crux of its relationship to civil society. That leads me to the next point of consideration.

### **A Space for Religion**

That religion may jeopardize the functioning of civil society by trying to impose its "private" views on the general public is a very weak argument. What religion could contribute to the goals of associational life in the civil society outweighs the danger of unwarranted interference of religion in civil society. As a matter of fact, we note more and more involvement of religion in politics and public life. This is to such an extent that it is the secular view of politics and civic life, untouched by religion and religious convictions, which is appearing more and more a strange one.

Moreover, we need to remember that religious freedom is a crucial matter of civil society. This issue is responsible in many instances for the emergence of active civil society as well as for the emergence of democratic mode of governance. The strongest argument for a public role of religion derives from the fact that the good of the society is not identical with the goals of the state. This very argument which creates room for civil society as the sphere for the pursuit of the good of the society not covered by the state, is also the one that justifies the role of

religion in public life. For, religion has the potential to contribute to the flourishing of the society and this is done in an atmosphere of freedom within the civil space. Things would be very different if religions try to do it by political means and control the state through religious dogmas. History illustrates amply the threats this represents. In short, the space created in civil society for religion is one that recognizes it as a reality that is neither factually nor normatively separated from the public sphere. At the same time, it is a space that religion cannot overstep, which will result in its manipulating and controlling the state, and stifling pluralism.

### **Christian Engagement in the Spirit of Solidarity**

What has been said has made it clear why religion is a part of the civil society, and how it has a role to play for the common good. In this light we shall now reflect upon what the Churches could do in the sphere of the civil society, especially in view of the fact that civil society is a realm of ambiguities as we saw above.

First of all, the Churches themselves are in a way like many other non-governmental organizations, functioning in the sphere of civil society. In particular today, when, under the influence of neo-liberalism and market, the civil-society is being turned into an arena for maximizing self-interest, thus adding to its ambiguity, it is important to underline the bondedness of human persons and their mutual obligations in the spirit of solidarity. The Church has in its tradition ample resources to forge the spirit of solidarity and togetherness.<sup>16</sup> The promotion of common good that goes beyond the pursuit of self-interest is immensely important for redeeming the civil society from being hijacked by vested interests. In fact, there is a need for a serious discourse in the public sphere about common good and solidarity that would be critical of instrumental rationality, market-directed competition, which all destroy the spirit of unity and communion in the society, in no less way than the imposition of religious views or ideologies on the society. If civil society is the arena wherein the interests of the individual and the common good need to be reconciled, the Church as interlocutor in civil society could intervene by bringing perspectives, orientations and humanistic sources for the effective harmonizing of these two interests.

### **Involvement in the Midst of Ambiguities**

The many ambiguities we noted regarding the civil society make the engagement of the Church more difficult and complex. Nevertheless, given the importance of the sphere of civil society, the Church needs to find spaces for its way of coming to terms with the situation and sustain discourses that build up the common good. The complexity of the civil society derives from the fact that it is a realm of various structures of power. At the same time, fortunately, it is also a realm where networks of resistance are in operation. These represent both challenge and opportunity for the Church. The challenge for the Church is to contribute to sustain a civil society in which no single force (caste, class, religion etc) would dominate. The opportunity is provided by the many forces of resistance in the civil society with whom the Church could enter into conversation and common engagement. Since the state could, as often happens, overstep its limits and end up damaging the common good, there is the need to restrain it – something that could be done effectively by a vibrant civil society.

Were the Church to resist the state all by itself, the issue could take on a sectarian dimension. The mediation of the civil society through which the Church engages itself with other forces could, on the one hand, ensure that its concerns are not simply sectarian but touch upon the good of all in the society. On the other hand, this joint effort could restrain the state more effectively. For, the state could transform the civil society as a forum in which it reproduces itself, so as to make the exercise of its power easy and unchallenged. This hegemony of the state over the civil society needs to be broken for a plurality of views to be heard. In other words, by its active role the Church could make the civil society a vibrant and critical sphere.

### **Inter-religious Relationship in Civil Society**

Once we realize that religion cannot be confined to the private sphere, because of its public nature, we encounter the thorny question of relationship among the various religious groups. Particularly this has proved an intractable problem in the Indian context. We could think of the situation wherein the Hindutva is trying to dominate the civil society. In fact, this is one of the strategies it has used to suppress pluralism. Here again if the Church were to take on Hindutva merely as a religious

ideology, what would result are religious conflicts. The issue is not that of Christianity and the Hindutva. The attempt to dominate and occupy the civil space by one single ideology is a common problem and the matter is one of public discourse and debate to which the Church could add its own voice.

Unfortunately, the perspectives and orientations that command inter-religious dialogue are ones that view it as an issue between religions. There is another important aspect the Christian engagement needs to explore. The public nature of religion calls for a re-location of inter-religious dialogue as a praxis within the civil society. Here religious groups will engage themselves to find common secular justification for what could very well come out of religious inspiration and beliefs. In this way, there is the chance of people meeting with each other not simply as belonging to different religious persuasions but as citizens concerned about common good and its promotion. For the flourishing of civil society there needs to be a serious engagement with others in their different conceptions of good life, their world-views, ideals, etc.

In this dialogue, as could be surmised, religious beliefs and convictions will have an important role, since they also provide for most people their conception of good life. Therefore a question may be raised whether the believers should necessarily restrain themselves from bringing to the public sphere motives from their religious convictions? The question becomes all the more important if we take note of the fact, that for many people, their conception of justice, their moral intuitions and their view of community are very much dependent on their religious convictions. Obviously claiming absolute validity for one's religious convictions and trying to impose them on others are certainly not constructive ways. The conversation needs to be informed by reasonableness. However, religious reasons may be adduced from one's point of view which may help people of other religious persuasions to learn and to engage in mutual enrichment and correction in view of developing a consensus for involving themselves for the common good. A person may very well participate in civil society and contribute to its flourishing by bringing to the fore what can be regarded as public reason. The fact that what a person proposes is inspired by her religious convictions need not stand in the way as long as it is a contribution to

public reasoning. This negotiation within the civil society will spare the dangerous situation of the state becoming partisan in support of one or other religious group, and taking advantage for its own vested interests the discord among religious groups.

When inter-religious dialogue takes place in the civil society, it calls for a process of self-critique on the part of religions. The readiness to subject one's religious convictions to critical scrutiny creates the climate to be able to co-operate with others in what concerns the public realm. I mean to say that a mutual reciprocity in discoursing and debating on what pertains to the common good, calls for self-critique on the part of religions. If the Church starts with its self-critique, it will set an example and create an appropriate climate for mutual understanding and collaboration among the religions in the civil space. This will be a dialogue that will create general interest, since it has as its point of reference life in the civil society and the attainment of common good. Here lies a task for the Church to interpret its faith in such a way that it could create public resonance and become compatible with the aspirations of the citizens for unity, justice and peace.

### **New Social Movements – Interlocutors for the Church**

We spoke of civil society as a site of resistance. This is carried out today mostly by new social movements – women's movements, workers movements, Dalit movements, civil rights movements, peoples' literary and artistic movements etc. They are "new" because they are different from the traditional class-based and party-based social movements. It is important to note that they represent in today's history the ethical ideals about which religions speak but find themselves often alienated from the concrete historical realities. They are ethics in praxis. These movements take up the cause of suppressed identities and give voice to people and groups who have been silenced for centuries and millennia. By their struggles against domination and exploitation, and through their "ethics of refusal", these movements challenge the dominant power-structures in the society as well as in the state. As such, social movements are an important force in the civil society.<sup>17</sup>

They [movements] work simultaneously at two levels. At one, they are defensive, seeking to protect civil society from the tentacles of the centralising state; at another, they are assertive, seeking to change

civil society from within and in the process putting forward a conception of the 'good life' somewhat different from that articulated by any of the established parties.<sup>18</sup>

Such being the case, we understand why engagement with these movements and collaboration with them can prove most fruitful in translating into action the ideal of justice and equity the Church projects. This is because, the new social movements have great potential to mobilize the people and awaken their agency and subjecthood, without needing much formal organization. Interaction with these movements could bring about in the Church greater flexibility and dynamism. The disappointment of these movements with the established order of things and their search for alternatives could serve as stimuli for the Church to give flesh and blood to its vision of a different society.

In modern times, the Church has, at least in principle, expressed opposition to casteism and casteist structures. The creation of a society on the basis of dignity of all human beings will depend upon continuous struggle against caste.<sup>19</sup> For this struggle to be effective, Church needs to take it up openly in the arena of the civil society. But ironically, the functioning of civil society could be conditioned and coloured by caste-considerations. But, in spite of this ambiguity, battle against casteism needs to be fought. There is, as it is, a hypocritical silence on caste. People, especially those of the upper castes, do not want to talk about caste in the open, and even more, do not want to be seen talking about caste. At the same time, however, most of the things are determined by caste-considerations. I think there is a serious failure of open discussion and debate about caste, and the civil society should serve for the Church as a forum to take up this debate and struggle.

### **The Danger of Christian Subculture**

Church can scuttle the challenges of active interaction in the civil society and its social movements, by withdrawing itself, as it does often, unfortunately. This withdrawal does not mean lack of concern for societal issues. Rather, what the Church does is to create its own realm, networks and ways for involvement in the society. Instead of being open to the civil society and for public reasoning, Church creates the Christian communities into a subculture and locates its social engagement within it. Since its social agenda does not derive from a debate in the public

realm, very often these social engagements tend to only reproduce the Church and its subculture in the public, which then is resented by others in the civil society.

It is often argued that the beneficiaries of Church's social engagement are "non-Christians", and this argument is invoked to justify that the Church is not sectarian, concerned about its own members. I think there is a world of difference between doing for others and doing with others. Doing for others cannot be considered as engagement in civil society, even if the beneficiaries of the involvement are peoples of other faiths. Involvement in civil society implies respect for the subjecthood of others which is taken seriously only when there is dialogue and mutuality.

The reason for the isolation could be, among other things, the ambiguities the civil society represents. But that should not be a motive, since taking risks and acting in ambiguous situation with certain clarity of vision about the common good could turn the Church into an effective interlocutor in the civil society. In fact, the rich Christian heritage on human person, on society and on various issues touching upon politics, economy and culture needs the mediation of civil society, even if it is a realm of ambiguities. More concretely, the Church needs to participate in public debates and discourses of the broader civil society. That it is capable of doing is borne out by the fact that during the period of the national struggle for Independence, members of the Christian community came out openly with their different views on issues of independence, swaraj, political participation, etc. through the various journals of the time. There was a lively and reasoned debate on these things also within the Christian community. The Catholic journals of the time played a crucial role by offering a platform for Christians to discuss and debate on matters of public concern.<sup>20</sup> This spirit of participation in the public sphere, unfortunately, has waned and today it is at the lowest ebb. The result is greater withdrawal of the Christian community to itself.

But there are certain new openings by which this tendency to withdrawal and self-isolation could be overcome. For example, the emergence within the Church of Basic Christian communities could be interpreted and practiced in a more broad and societal perspective. It would be too little to consider these communities simply as inner-ecclesial

units for the renewal of faith and worship. They have social potential in as much as they could be active participants in the civil society. Properly oriented, they could function as an interface between religious beliefs and the challenges civil society poses – dialogue with various groups and identities, resistance to the state and restraint on the market, etc. These communities have also the potential to strengthening the civil society by instilling a participatory and discursive model of life and culture.

### **Conclusion**

Civil society is wrought with many ambiguities; it is also pulled from all directions, and it suffers especially the intrusion of the state and the market. In spite of all, civil society is of crucial importance for a democratic form of life that acknowledges the dignity and rights of every human person and the value of justice and peace. An analysis of the way civil society functions in its multiple dimensions illustrates further its ambiguous character. We need to particularly note the fact that in India and in other developing nations, societies are not made up of autonomous individuals, but have many identities and groupings which create an asymmetry of power within the civil society. This gets reflected also in the relationship of the civil society to the state.

Keeping religion and religious resources out of the purview of civil society represents a narrow view, even though such a view may claim to be modern and secular. Exclusion of religion from civil society does not answer the ambiguities. Rather religion and religious groups could play an important role in participating in the civil society and in its dynamics, without dissolving or bracketing their identities and religious convictions, and at the same time refraining from imposing religious views on the rest of the society.

Christian engagement today needs to take into account both the ambiguities of the civil society as well as the complexities of religion being partner in the civil society. The Church will become ineffective if it withdraws from the public realm in order to cultivate a world its own and to foster a subculture of Christian communities. The rich Christian heritage about human person, society, politics, culture, etc. could be channeled to serve the wider public – as it is intended to – only when the Church accepts the ambiguities and enters into the world of civil society for a vibrant interaction with other participants in this sphere.

<sup>1</sup> In India at the time of Independence people pinned a lot of hope on the state as the agent for social transformation – something that was furthered by the framing of constitution which contains seeds for serious social change in the country. But subsequent experience proved that the state has not only been able to rise up to the role it was expected to perform, but, quite the contrary, the state became a tool in the hands of the dominant castes and classes. Today, it has become, with new economic policies, a tool in the hands of the market-forces. We understand then the frustration and disillusionment of the people with the Indian state.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Neera Chandhoke, *The Conceits of Civil Society*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> From a historical point of view, the concept of civil society has undergone a great evolution. For an overview of this development through the centuries and in the view of significant thinkers, cf. Sudipta Kaviraj – Sunil Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society. History and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Delhi (South Asian edition), 2002, pp. 9-146; see also Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992. We need to take into account the fact that in other parts of the world the development of the idea of civil society has not been the same, due to a different set of social, political and cultural conditions. These have their impact on the way civil society is conceived, for example, in Asia. For a detailed study of civil society in relation to various countries and regions of Asia, see David C. Schak – Wayne Hudson (eds), *Civil Society in Asia.*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> From this perspective we could appreciate the contribution of John Locke regarding civil society and his views on private property.

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> The tradition of strong associational life in the modern history of the Philippines, starting from 1896, has contributed to many regime changes, including the most dramatic overthrow of Marcos' regime. See Isagani R. Serrano, "Civil Society in the Philippines: Struggling for Sustainability", in David C. Schak – Wayne Hudson (eds), *Civil Society in Asia, op. cit.* pp. 103-113.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, (Ed), "Subalterns and Ethical Auditing" *Jeevadhara*, January 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Neera Chandhoke, "Civil Society as the Third Space", in Rajesh Tandon – Ranjit Mohanty (eds), *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India*, Sage Publications, Delhi, 2003, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Some Western authors like Adam B. Seligman have taken note of this heterogeneity of the civil society marking the Eastern part of Europe. The heterogeneity is such, that Seligman doubts about the viability of the very concept of civil society, supposedly a sphere of equal citizens. See Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, p.202. He is of the view that, whereas in the West the "political slogan" of civil society is used to advance the cause of community against excessive individualism, the concept of civil society, if it wants to have any meaning in the Eastern part of Europe, should serve as a means to promote the autonomy and agency of the individual. *Ibid.* p. 203.

<sup>10</sup> Sudha Pai and Ram Narayan, "Democratic Governance, Civil Society and Dalit Power", in Rajesh Tandon – Ranjit Mohanty (eds), *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India*, Sage Publications, Delhi, 2003, p.246; see also Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, NBCLC, Bangalore, 2007. .

<sup>11</sup> Cohen and Arato hold such a position. Cf. Jean L. Cohen – Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> To be able to understand this, one needs to go beyond an essentialist conception of civil society as something pre-given and ready-made. In reality, there is mutual dependence and fluidity between the state and civil society. Cf. Vikash N. Pandey, "State and Civil Society: Reframing the Question in the Indian Context", in J. Jayaram (ed.), *On Civil Society. Issues and Perspectives*, Sage Publications, Delhi, 2005, pp. 90-109.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ranjita Mohanty, "Save the Chilika Movement. Interrogating the State and the Market", in Rajesh Tandon – Ranjita Mohanty (eds), *Op.cit.* , p.174.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. T.N. Madan, "Secularism in its Place", in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and Its Critics*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, pp. 297-320; Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance", *Ibid.* .pp. 321 – 344.

<sup>15</sup> For a critical re-consideration of the secularization thesis, see Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican, 2004. See e my paper "Asia and the Social Teachings of the Church. Some Basic Reflections" On the occasion of the presentation of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Asian Conference, Bangkok, January, 25- 27, 2007 (shortly to be published in the proceedings of the conference).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jean L. Cohen – Andrew Arato, *Op.cit.*,

<sup>18</sup> Ramachandra Guha, "The Problem" (special issue on civil societies) , *Seminar* 355 (1989), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, NBCLC, Bangalore, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent study on the participation of Christians in public discourse and debate, see Mary John, *National Movement and Catholic Christianity in India 1857-1947. A Study Based on the Official Catholic Journals of the Period* ( unpublished Ph.D. dissertation written under my guidance), University of Madras, Chennai, 2006.