

CIVIL SOCIETY, POPULAR POLITICAL CULTURE, AND THE CHURCH

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Abstract

The Church understands itself as an agent in complete human liberation, but regrettably it is often seen as belonging among those influences from which people need to be liberated. In continuing the dialogue with humanity outlined in *Gaudium et spes* the Church must pay attention to how she is regarded by dialogue partners. From the perspective of politics and public life, one influential and flattering account sees the Church as part of civil society. There is a danger in accepting this allocated public role if civil society is understood as distinguished from the political and the economic. The danger is of a restriction to particular rather than universal concerns, to advocacy rather than analysis, which would prevent the Church from exercising its appropriate mission. That mission requires it to address the political and socio-economic system as a whole. Granted the need to abide by a principle of restraint whenever engaging in public debate concerned with constraining the liberties of citizens, the Catholic Church would wish to have the kind of liberty as corporate citizen which would allow it address relevant issues without restriction. Rawls's later model of public reason, within broad political culture (public reason in the broad sense) against the background of the culture of civil society, is perhaps a better tool to allow for the Church's continuing dialogue with politics and economics as well as having a role in advocacy.

Introduction

'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men (and women) of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.'¹ The bold opening sentences of the document announce a challenging programme. They also reflect the mindset of the 1960s, at least in the western world, when there was a genuine confidence that the initiatives undertaken following the Second World War in setting up the United Nations and in adopting a Universal Declaration of Human Rights would be fruitful. Also the economic recovery following the devastation of the war was strengthening awareness of the resources that could be made available so as to realise those hopes. The creation of the Bretton Woods institutions of the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the World Bank) in 1944 were part of that movement of creativity and hope. The griefs and anxieties of the text echo the influential 1941 speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt in which he had set the agenda for America's participation in the war and in the construction of a better world subsequently. He had announced the project of delivering people from what oppresses them by ensuring their

freedom. The 'four freedoms' as they came to be called, namely, the 'freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship God in one's own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear' expressed a widely shared hope which had its shadow side in the prevalence of fear, poverty, and oppression.²

Almost twenty years since the end of the war, the Council could speak against the background of what had been achieved in that time. The achievements were considerable, and so the Council text can speak of progress without hesitation or embarrassment. In addressing the political community in chapter 4 of *Gaudium et spes* the Council could refer in passing to changes for the better resulting from 'the cultural, economic and social evolution' of peoples. It could refer to 'cultural, economic and social progress' (#73). Progress, evolution, had taken place, but there was no denying the continuing existence of tyranny and oppression, of poverty and injustice. So there is a great realism in what the Council proclaims. It relies on the language of human rights, echoing the achievement of the international community in expressing its post war aspirations in these terms, but underlining the reality that many of those proclaimed rights remained to be realised in fact. 'Men (and women) are voicing disapproval of any kind of government which blocks civil or religious liberty, multiplies the victims of ambition and political crimes, and wrenches the exercise of authority from pursuing the common good to serving the advantage of a certain faction or of the rulers themselves. There are some such governments holding power in the world' (#73). The Pastoral Constitution is a compendium of reflection on issues in which human hopes are still imperfectly realised.

The bold proclamation of sharing hopes and fears was only moderately successful in finding partners in dialogue among the men and women of the age, who, although not believers themselves, could nonetheless recognise in the Church a partner in solidarity sharing the burden of delivering humanity from all that oppresses it.³ The impact of the Council's Pastoral Constitution was mainly felt within the Church, and led to a revitalization of Christians' own self-understanding of their role in public, economic and political life. Unfortunately, many secular thinkers continued to see the Church, not as a partner in the task of liberating people from oppression, but as one of the forces of oppression from which people had to be liberated. This attitude has continued in the identification of the task which liberal political philosophy has set itself. The tradition of political thought from Hobbes and Locke has taken for granted that the problems created by religious intolerance and by the wars of religion had identified the problem for which liberal institutions and liberal philosophy was the solution. The inability of people to agree on what constitutes their ultimate good means they can only manage to live together in peace and harmony if they leave questions of the good (also common good!) to one side and concentrate on matters of process and the right. At heart, liberal political philosophy has been suspicious of religion, and this suspicion is often reinforced by the heritage of the Enlightenment accompanying liberal thought. It is a testimony to the intellectual good faith of the Catholic Church that its own positive assessment of the valid core of liberal political thought has not been revoked due to a lack of reciprocity by liberal thinkers.

Forty years after *Gaudium et spes* it is appropriate to review the way in which the Church understands its relationship to the world of politics. It would be necessary to identify the hopes and anxieties which now shape public life. But also perhaps with special urgency, it would be important to identify the possibilities for dialogue with partners from outside the community of faith. Now more than ever it is important for such a dialogue with humankind

that the Church attend to the way in which her messages are received so as to be able to communicate effectively with contemporaries. This is not to suggest that public image should be a criterion of validity, but to emphasise that communication which does not take into consideration how it will be received, can be futile, or even counterproductive.

Recent developments within political philosophy have facilitated the emergence of new attitudes towards religion, replacing the antagonism rooted in the Enlightenment with an appreciation of religion's positive contributions to political order. Among the relevant developments are the communitarian critique of liberalism, the attention being paid to civil society, and the increased awareness of social capital. Each of these developments allows for a revisiting of the relationship between religion and politics.

In particular, the discussion of religion as an element of civil society seems to offer a positive account of religion, with which citizens of faith might be satisfied. A new concept of civil society is emerging. Much of the newness is driven by the experiences of people involved in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which play an increasingly important role in national and international affairs. The new emphasis on civil society poses questions for traditional understandings of both politics and religion. I argue that while there are attractive possibilities arising from the interest in civil society, there are also serious disadvantages, and that John Rawls's analysis of public reason and political culture might be more useful.

The Problem: Religion and Politics

The relationship between religion and politics is complex, and cannot be comprehended with a simple intellectual tool. Attempts to do so have proved unsatisfactory. On the one hand, there has been the attempt to subordinate one to the other, using the concepts of means and ends, and on the other hand, there has been the attempt to keep them separate, using a pair of concepts such as private and public. The instrumentalisation of one for the sake of the other is exemplified on the one hand in Rousseau's proposal of a civil religion, and on the other hand in the subordination by some medieval thinkers of the common good of temporal peace and justice to the ultimate good of divine peace and justice. Neither position is satisfactory, since each of them involves a denial of some essential element of either religion or politics. At the same time the liberal tradition of confining religion to the realm of the private while considering politics to be concerned with public matters has foundered on the refusal of religion to be excluded from public life. Given the undeniable presence of religion, how is this to be accommodated conceptually?

An adequate conceptual accommodation must satisfy views from two perspectives. It must allow for an understanding of the role of religion from the perspective of the political community, and it must allow citizens of faith to understand their participation in the political community in a manner consistent with their self-understanding as members of the Church. They must be able to combine their theological self-understanding with their understanding of themselves as participants in the political community. Sophistication is required, whereby a split-level self-understanding must be articulated.

The relationship in the past has often been seen as one of mutual antagonism. From the Church's perspective, the assertion of human autonomy and the exaltation of liberty on which the liberal state was based appeared as rebellion against God and the refusal of the obedience which the creature owed the Creator. The failure to respect a divine source for law and

morality was expected to lead to a disintegration of moral order and a collapse of respect for law. From the perspective of the liberal polity, the claim of religious authority to command the obedience of citizens, and often not only that of the members of the religious bodies in question, appeared as a threat to the freedom of citizens. The reliance on faith implied that believers were not amenable to rational argument as democratic politics required, and so constituted a potential subversion from within.

That antagonism has not disappeared completely from the relationship.⁴ There are some issues which continue to provide a battleground of the secular and the religious, and there are some places where traditional religious division continues to frustrate politics. Examples of the latter include Northern Ireland, the Balkan states, and Palestine. An example of the former is the set of disputes surrounding the legal protection of human life, including abortion, embryo production for experimentation, and euthanasia.⁵ Opinions on these controversial matters frequently follow the fault line of religious affiliation, even if Catholics insist that they rely only on arguments based on reason.

The liberal maintains that the governing of human societies must be with the consent of the governed. The theocrat maintains that the governing of human societies must be according to the law of God and that revelation provides what is needed for the task of human government. For the liberal, theocracy must always be suspect, because of the fear that the will of God (as interpreted by the powers that be) will be *imposed* on those who do not accept it, because they do not share the faith of the powers. This fear is warranted historically, and John Rawls, for instance, makes a great deal of the history of religious persecution, and the turmoil caused by the wars of religion in Europe as the background to his political liberalism.⁶

Faced with the ever threatening prospect of religious fanatics achieving political power and imposing their view of the world and of social order on everyone, liberal regimes put in place a set of regulations and structures in order to nip the religiously motivated tyranny in the bud. The regulations and structures include measures which can be roughly identified as follows, not necessarily in any order of significance:

- The separation of church and state
- The rule of law guaranteeing individual liberties including freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the freedoms of movement and association
- A secular foundation for the state, with authorities derived from the consent of the governed
- A culture in which toleration is fostered, such that beliefs and practices are to be permitted up to the point at which they harm society or harm others
- A culture in which certain standards of argument are established and enforced through social pressure. For the most part, those standards are modelled on the forms of argument appropriate to the law
- A culture in which there is a sharp separation of public and private, such that religious matters are relegated to the private and excluded from the public domain

With MacIntyre we can note the success of the liberal world-view in setting the language and forms of debate, so that it can only be called into question in terms favourable to itself.⁷

What options do religiously committed people have in liberal democracies within pluralist societies when they wish to contribute (reasonably, not violently) to political and public affairs on the basis of their faith convictions? We can think in terms of the spectrum between the poles of protest, opting out, counter-cultural witness, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, participation in the political and public processes but in submission to the liberal rules of engagement.

On the face of it, submission to the liberal rules for participation in public life seems promising.

- The Christian can enjoy the protection of the personal and civil liberties of speech, conscience, religion, association and movement which is provided for all citizens.
- The Christian can take advantage of the means of public communication and debate in order to make her case.
- The structures of representative government provide also the opportunities for lobbying and campaigning on relevant issues.

However, for the Christian in public life, there is an abiding sense of being on probation. Like the recidivist criminal who has done his time, and who is given one more chance to lead a 'normal' life in society, so the religious believer can have a sense of being admitted to public debate in a spirit of reluctant toleration. The constant vigilance against religious domination at the heart of the liberal world-view provokes an apologetic attitude in the religiously motivated engaged citizen. So what can the committed Christian engaging in public discourse achieve, while conforming to the norms of participation as dictated by the liberal consensus?

Despite the history of antagonism, there has also been a process of learning and adjustment on both sides. In the case of the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et spes* and its Decree on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae* represented a revision of the Church's understanding of its role in the world. While not abandoning its sense of mission to proclaim the gospel to all and to effect a sanctification of all of human life, the Church acknowledged that it could not and ought not rely on the power of the state to achieve its mission. Within political philosophy, on the other hand, there is evidence of a more positive view of the role of religion in the political culture, and of the contribution which the Church can make to sustaining the liberal polity.

Civil Society

The revival of interest in the notion of civil society provides a new context for considering the place of the Church within the polity. Two major developments have precipitated the renewed interest in the topic of civil society. First, the process of the collapse of the Soviet block, and second, the process of globalisation. In the first of these processes, the notion of civil society has played a double role. Civil society is used to label and reflect on the agents of change nurtured by Church groups and dissidents and others such as the Solidarity trade union. At the same time, the difficulties experienced in the attempt to implement free markets and liberal democratic systems were accounted for as due to the lack of civil society. The absence of certain practices and habits among the population, the lack of a moral order in which expectations are sustained by social sanction, and the impoverished relationships and networks comprising social capital have revealed that the functioning of markets and democratic processes is not to be presupposed simply because the formal structures are in

place. Hence the renewed attention paid to the old notion of civil society.⁸ Accordingly, the term civil society has a double referent, labelling both a present reality (the agents of social change) and an absent reality (what is needed for the reforms to succeed). The relationship between civil society and the democratic system is dialectical. On the one hand, civil society is a precondition for political order. Without the habits of trust, the practices of argument, the networks of associating, democracies cannot function. At the same time, civil society is a product of political order, since it is the security achieved by the framework of government and law which makes it possible for the organizations of civil society to function.

The second dynamic drawing attention to civil society is globalisation (economic, cultural, military, diplomatic).⁹ The worldwide impact of economic activity and markets reveals an absence of state, while at the same time a market based shared order emerges. There is a search for forms of global governance. In this context a third sector apart from multi-national corporations (MNCs) and state based bodies (such as the IMF) seems desirable, and is already functioning through international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). This is spoken of as global civil society.

Civil Society: From a Pair to a Triad

The new contexts and discussions are generating a new notion of civil society, which differs considerably from the traditional understanding. Where traditionally civil society was paired with the state, it is now located in a triad. In early forms of its usage, civil society was used to identify society under government and law. This usage is found in Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, for instance.

Hegel and Marx also relied on a dyad, but for them the realm of civil society was the realm of market and property relations. Hegel emphasised the dimension of freedom in the contracts on which all economic activity was based. Marx brought his analysis to bear on 'bourgeois' (= civil) society showing that the supposedly freely entered contracts were illusory, and that there was no freedom for those who had nothing to trade but their labour power.

All the more interesting then that the current usage of civil society distances it from the realm of the market and the economy. The *Economist* magazine uses the term in the sense it finds the UN using it, namely, to refer to NGOs who are outside the realm of the state and of the market place.¹⁰ Debates about environmental issues in the context of the Kyoto agreement reveal a similar triangular model: there are commercial interests, there are governments of states, and there are non-governmental organisations which agitate on behalf of the global environment. The international dimension whereby global civil society is a counterbalancing power to that of economic forces is leading to a clarification whereby civil society is distinguished from the economy. In more recent usage, therefore, civil society is seen as one factor in a triad of factors, making one point of a triangle along with the state and the economy.

The role of NGOs in many developing countries has grown and their importance in protecting the rights and interests of people, especially the poor has been considerable. Several of these are now so well established internationally, that as international non governmental organizations (INGOs) they provide a great service where there is still a lack of international government. Amnesty International, devoted to the protection of human rights by exposing abuses of rights by states, and Greenpeace, devoted to the protection of the natural environment, are examples. The role of NGOs and INGOs, especially in relation to the

interests of the developing world, is now so well established that organised civil society and global civil society are specified in these terms.

Global civil society embraces that range of INGOs including religious and charitable organizations that devote their efforts to the elimination or reduction of the international debt stranglehold on poor countries, the handling of the AIDS crisis, the care of refugees, the global environment including climatic change, and the fostering of sustainable development. All of these bring their efforts to bear so as to ensure that there are countervailing pressures balancing the power of states as well as the vested interests of business corporations who are effective in mobilizing their governments to represent them.

This is a simplified account of the emergence of global civil society, but it is shaping the theoretical reflection. Where formerly, civil society was seen as paired with the institutions of government and law, and these were held in a dialectical tension with one another, the new model sees a triad of the state, the economy, and civil society. The dialectical tension of mutual dependence along with autonomy has been replaced by antagonism. Civil society is antagonistic towards the economic powers, and also towards the state insofar as it fails to distance itself critically from the interests of the market. At the same time, the original antagonism towards religion in the depiction of civil society has not entirely disappeared.

In part, the problem is that the concept of civil society was developed by early modern writers (for example Locke, Ferguson, Hobbes) who were concerned about how societies would hold together under newly emerging modern conditions in which traditional sources of authority – including religion – were losing their grip. Civil society – arising out of voluntary relationships between people – was seen as an important part of the solution. Religion, at least the predominant forms of Christianity in its early modern setting, especially Roman Catholicism – with its traditional hierarchical notions of authority – was conceived from the beginning in opposition to civil society.¹¹

Religion in Civil Society

Far from the process of modernization making religion obsolete, there is now a new visibility of religion in the public space and in the issues demanding attention. So the Churches and religious bodies are spoken of as belonging to civil society, as the realm of socially organized activity and participation. This is the recent usage of civil society, which is one corner of a triangle. Among the valued contributions of civil society on this view is the creation and maintenance of social capital.¹² This term refers to the acquired skills and competencies of people in their interrelationships. The web of connections is as important as the skills, since the skills are effectively exercised in the context of collaboration with others. Also the habits of a work ethic, and the expectation of trust and reliability are acknowledged as preconditions for a successful market economy.¹³

A new respect for the dimension of civil society is expressed from the perspectives of both politics and economics. Especially the experience of implementing new structures of democratic government and new systems of ownership, production and marketing, in the former states of the Soviet Union and its allies, has revealed the importance of civil society. The political culture appreciates the contribution of civil society in facilitating the formation and education of citizens, the habituating of people, not only in the basic skills of literacy and

numeracy, but more importantly, in the capacities to engage in argument and to accept conciliation in conflict.¹⁴

David Herbert has usefully surveyed the literature in which civil society has been considered recently.¹⁵ Religion is understood afresh in this context, and the work of José Casanova in particular is taken as exemplifying this new approach.¹⁶ On the one hand, the role of religion within civil society is important in its own right; on the other hand, in the triangle of forces of the state, market, and civil society, religion is seen as a force within civil society which can resist the dominating influence of political power and economic wealth.

The literature recognises the contribution of religion and of the Churches in particular societies in fostering the constituent elements of democratic culture. Although some of the literature continues to assume religion's insignificance, the actual experience of social and political change in Central and Eastern Europe reveals that organized religion contributed a great deal, and this is acknowledged in the relevant literature. Summarizing this discussion Herbert notes four different ways in which religion contributed to the development of civil society, even if, as he remarks, the nature of religion continues to be misconceived.

First of all, religion provided an 'institutional space in otherwise totalitarian societies within which it was possible to organize various forms of opposition to the communist state'.¹⁷ As the restrictive presence of the state diminished, other spaces became available and dissidents no longer relied on the space provided, for instance, by the Lutheran State Churches of the German Democratic Republic. But at a critical point in both Poland and the GDR, the institutional space maintained and made available by the Churches was important.

The second contribution of religion was at the symbolic level, providing a wealth of symbols, metaphors and stories, which made it possible for people to interpret their political experience in terms other than those provided by the communist state ideologies. The international dimension provided by the Churches also played an important role in strengthening the consciousness of those who resisted the domination by the state. This is the third contribution. Herbert notes the importance of the public Masses celebrated by Pope John Paul II on his visit to Poland (and elsewhere) as witnessing to a world embracing solidarity which transcended space and time.

Herbert adds a fourth, which is the provision of intellectual resources to animate and sustain opposition and the critique of the state. Such a figure as Vaclav Havel is taken by Herbert to illustrate the powerful use of an intellectual critique which drew on the resources of a metaphysical tradition sustained by the Catholic Church.

This consideration of the Church's role within civil society is positive, and many people in the Church are flattered by this encouraging evaluation. However, there are dangers associated with this view and these should be assessed before accepting the allocated role within civil society.

Disadvantages of Civil Society as Locus for Religion

If its self-understanding as a corporate citizen in a liberal polity is primarily in terms of civil society in one corner of the triangle, the Church is likely to find itself restricted in definition and constrained when it comes to action. There are three principal strands of limitation:

assumption of particularity of interest, confinement to an advocacy stance, and exclusion from politics and the market.

Among the organizations belonging to civil society are vested interest groups whose perspectives are not universal and general, but are particular and local, and often narrowly self-interested. Residents' associations, single-issue campaigning groups, lobby groups, belong within the category as well as cultural groups and educational institutions and organizations. These all represent particular interests. Accordingly, there is a danger that the Church, by association, can appear to represent particular and special interests. This would undermine its ability to proclaim its message which is universal and not restricted to any race, class, culture or aspect of human existence.

Because of its involvement in education, health care and the provision of supports for the poor, the Church and Church organizations have often engaged in advocacy on behalf of groups which have been neglected by the market or by governments. The danger is that its contributions to political culture and to public debate be seen exclusively as advocacy, and therefore to be processed in the political adjustment of the many competing demands which seek attention. Especially in the emergent global civil society in which INGOs confront MNCs and seek to create global systems of governance which can limit their power, Church organizations can appear as advocacy groups on behalf of the victims. While this is an appropriate and important role for the Church, it does not exhaust its mission, which requires of it to speak of the unrestricted common good of all humanity, and to challenge everyone, whether rich or poor, to revise their priorities. An example of this is in relation to the debates about proper strategies for managing the AIDS epidemic in some countries. It is assumed by some people that the Church is involved primarily as a caritative organisation or that its function is complementary to that of the state in managing public health. This seems to be the prevalent assumption when the Church is criticised for not advocating the full range of social policy measures including the use of condoms. The comprehensive character of the Church's mission can fade from view.

Within the triad of state, market, and civil society, the identification of civil society as the proper social location for the Church brings with it the danger of being excluded from participation in the discourses about politics and the economy. The Church sees it as its mission to address its concerns appropriately to these aspects also of social and political existence, and the tradition of social teaching and comment has developed this strand. Its politically recognized entitlement to contribute to the public debate as a corporate citizen might be jeopardized by a too hasty relegation to civil society, thereby excluding the Church from consideration of the market or the state.

The Church seeks a positive understanding of its self-limitation as a corporate citizen within the liberal polity.¹⁸ But this requires that it be able also to remain consistent with its understanding of itself and its mission in a theological context. These limitations of the civil society category pose a problem for this requirement. Drawing on Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelium nuntiandi* (1975) the Church sees its mission as addressing 'and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, humankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.'¹⁹ This is the mission which has led Pope John Paul II to speak out against injustice, violence, oppression and poverty on his international visits and which has inspired Bishops of many local churches

to address questions of the economy, politics, peace and justice. This mission is not to be comprehended within the category of civil society alone. Of course, in these contributions to public discourse, the Church renounces any reliance on coercion or implementation of the power of the state, but seeks to convince solely through the strength of its message.

Rawls on Public Reason and Public Political Culture

Given the dangers associated with a confinement of the Church's public role to participation in civil society, perhaps a more hospitable categorical framework for its self-understanding in relation to politics is available from John Rawls. There has been a significant development in Rawls's understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. This is clear from articles published in the late 1990s when compared with his position as presented in *Political Liberalism*.²⁰ In contrast to the earlier prevalent disjunction of public and private, which Rawls had glossed as public and non-public, he begins to consider different levels of the public. He distinguishes three aspects.

- (1) The background culture of civil society.
- (2) The public, political culture, viewed widely.
- (3) Public reason: public political culture, viewed narrowly.

What is new in his thought is the consideration given to the second aspect. It is best understood in contrast to the other two aspects.

The background culture (1) is said to be the culture of civil society. This has available to it many forms of conversation and argument and various media through which communication and information flow take place. Rawls endorses the need for as open and free a communication as possible in this background culture. The idea of public reason in the narrow sense (3) applies in the public political forum. Rawls restricts the idea in terms of context, content and persons.²¹ The context of public reason is the discussion of the law which is to be enacted and applied for a democratic people with the coercive backing of the state. The content of public reason is provided by the family of reasonable political conceptions of justice on which people draw in making their proposals and criticisms in the discussions about coercive law. The people involved are judges, officials, and candidates for public office when speaking in their public capacities. Citizens also are included in the requirements of public reason insofar as they subject their own proposals to the criterion of reciprocity. This criterion requires of them to make only proposals that they can expect would be found reasonable by their fellow citizens, considered as free and equal.

It is evident from this brief presentation that the narrow view of public reason is very narrow indeed. The typical image for it is the judges of the US Supreme Court giving a judgment in relation to constitutional rights. The persons, content and context of the judgment are very specific and limited. But the possibility of sustaining such a view and practice of public reason depends on there being a public political culture in the wide sense (2). In what follows, I will outline the wide sense of public reason while at the same time considering Rawls's understanding of the relationship of religion and politics.

In dealing with the question of religion and politics in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls imagined several reasonable comprehensive doctrines, including religious ones, coexisting in a liberal, pluralist polity, each with its view of the good life and its notions of justice and truth. The

polity is only possible, however, because the adherents of a comprehensive doctrine exercise restraint, not insisting on their view of the true and the good, but willing to accept the content of the overlapping consensus between the reasonable doctrines as a basis for regulating the common life. Each one will have her own reasons for seeing this content as true and good, based on her comprehensive doctrine. But the grounds for arguing in favor of this content with representatives of other reasonable comprehensive doctrines will not appeal to these reasons, but only to public reason.

There are several reasonable comprehensive doctrines, some of them religious, but in Rawls's view of the liberal polity there is one overlapping consensus which relies on notions of the politically reasonable rather than on notions of truth. This seems to require considerable restraint on the part of the religiously committed citizen. Only what could belong in the overlapping consensus might be part of the public discourse between a representative of a Christian world-view and, for instance, a defender of secular liberal individualism. Rawls asks:

*Is it possible for citizens of faith to be wholehearted members of a democratic society who endorse society's intrinsic political ideals and values and do not simply acquiesce in the balance of political and social forces?.... How is it possible – or is it – for those of faith, as well as the nonreligious (secular), to endorse a constitutional regime even when their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it, and indeed may decline?*²²

It is very significant here that he writes of both secular, i.e. non-religious, reasonable comprehensive doctrines and religious ones in their relation to the constitutional regime. That is, he does not consider the constitutional regime as automatically favoring a secular worldview over against a religious worldview.

Political liberalism requires there to be comprehensive doctrines which ground for their own adherents the validity of the elements on which consensus can be attained, even though the reasons for assenting to the consensus will be different for the various doctrines. Judgments grounded in a comprehensive doctrine may be true or false; judgments which are part of the overlapping consensus are said to be reasonable. Citizens who endorse a reasonable judgment in the overlapping consensus will hold it to be true or right on the basis of their comprehensive doctrine. 'It is central to political liberalism that free and equal citizens affirm both a comprehensive doctrine and a political conception.'²³

While Rawls considers some religious comprehensive doctrines to be unreasonable, his mature position includes religious comprehensive doctrines with their appropriate languages as among the reasonable doctrines which uphold and sustain the overlapping consensus. At the same time, the content of public reason is not secular; on the contrary, secular in the sense of deliberately non-religious doctrines are among the comprehensive doctrines supporting the political conception. A political conception is neither religious nor secular, but is capable of being accepted by proponents of both religious and secular comprehensive doctrines.²⁴

Rawls calls public reason a framework, and maintains that it contains many possible forms. So there is no single 'public reason' but several varieties. Rawls insists that there are many possible political conceptions of justice and so many forms of public reason. 'There are many liberalisms and related views, and therefore many forms of public reason specified by a

family of reasonable political conceptions. Of these, justice as fairness, whatever its merits, is but one.'²⁵ Rawls now includes within the family of possible political conceptions 'Catholic views of the common good and solidarity when they are expressed in terms of political values'.²⁶ He also includes Habermas's discourse conception of legitimacy. Important in this quoted passage is the qualification about expression in terms of political values. Rawls refers to John Finnis and Jacques Maritain in a footnote, which seems to suggest that their works achieve such expression. It suggests that the type of argument in terms of natural law which builds its understanding of social and legal order on the basis of the dignity of the human person could offer a candidate for a political conception of justice. He accepts that this possible political conception might offer an alternative to his own proposed 'justice as fairness'. Acceptable political conceptions of justice propose principles which apply to the basic structure of society, which can be presented independent of any comprehensive doctrine, and which are grounded in such fundamental ideas as the freedom and equality of citizens and the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation.

Thus, the content of public reason is given by the principles and values of the family of liberal political conceptions of justice meeting these conditions. To engage in public reason is to appeal to one of these political conceptions – to their ideals and principles, standards and values – when debating fundamental political questions. This requirement still allows us to introduce into political discussion at any time our comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, provided that, in due course, we give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies our comprehensive doctrine is said to support.²⁷

Far from excluding religious considerations, Rawls here seems to allow for religious considerations to be part of political debate, with the proviso that if any policy or legal measure is being advocated that the appropriate public reasons be provided at some later date. Religious reasons are not being excluded; but only those religious reasons may be advanced in support of political proposals which are capable of being translated into public reasons in the strict sense. The reference to the perspective of the common good suggests that this language is capable of such translation, even if it is associated with a particular religious comprehensive doctrine.

This tolerance for religious and secular reasons in public discourse characterizes what Rawls terms the wide view of public political culture (2 above). The *proviso*, the injunction to present proper political reasons in due course, protects public reason, and marks off public political culture from the background culture of civil society. But Rawls also emphasizes that there are positive reasons for introducing comprehensive doctrines into public political discussion. That citizens would have knowledge and understanding of each other's comprehensive doctrines strengthens the viability of an overlapping consensus since proposals made in public reason for legislative measures will respect the reasons that others will have for supporting or rejecting the proposals.

Public political culture in the narrow sense is confined to the use of argument by a limited number of people acting in official capacities within rather narrowly defined roles. Public reason as Rawls has introduced it, is restricted in this double sense. But at the same time, civil society embraces many areas of engagement in which people associate only or at least primarily with those who share their religion, their values, their convictions or their interests. The background culture as Rawls has characterized it can be very tolerant, in allowing

diverse groups to coexist, but such groups do not necessarily interact. The many organizations and institutions of civil society can be discrete and independent, so that on their own they do not support a properly political discourse, even if they do contribute many aspects of socialization. This becomes a problem in some contexts, when a society comprising a plurality of cultures and groups is not actually pluralist in its shared culture but is tolerant of diversity so long as groups are confined to ghettos.

The interaction which takes place in public reason can only lead to the formation of overlapping consensus if there is some other arena in which citizens and groups can interact in a process of dialogue and deliberation. Rawls's idea of the wide view of public political culture seems to be an acknowledgement of the need for a bridge between public reason in the narrow sense, and the range of comprehensive doctrines in the background culture of civil society. The need is for a forum of some kind which mediates between and overlaps both the domains of civil society and the arena of public reason. In practice, in pluralist societies with liberal polities, this forum is provided in a fluid way – more or less successfully – by the media, educational institutions, and cultural and religious groups including churches, which contribute to fostering the relevant encounter.

Rawls's discussion of public reasons suggests that religious arguments do not have to remain confined to the non-public realms of civil society. Believers, speaking from their faith convictions, do not have to be on the defensive within liberal political communities. However, the condition under which such contribution is welcome is that citizens of faith continue to abide by reasonable norms of argument and reasonable standards of participation in public discourse. Rawls has a specific meaning for the term 'reasonable' in this context:

Citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of cooperation according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice; and when they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that other citizens also accept those terms. The criterion of reciprocity requires that when those terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must also think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position.²⁸

Is this a more satisfactory way for a religiously committed citizen, or for the Church, to understand itself and its role in the political context? It seems to allow for the raising of the kinds of questions which religiously committed citizens might wish to raise in dialogue with fellow citizens, as for example, questions about the realist foundations of social order, the ultimate possibility of justice beyond flawed human attempts, the dialectic between failure and redemption in difficult social and political histories, whether the common good is merely constructed and invented, or whether it can be discovered to be rooted in an ultimate common good who is God. Such questions can be asked and pursued rigorously in our wide public political culture, without thereby intending to impose answers, or more specifically, constitutional arrangements and coercive laws derived exclusively from those answers on fellow citizens.²⁹ Accordingly, this position developed and articulated by Rawls in the late work seems to be satisfactory.

Conclusion

The voices expressing appreciation of the contribution of the Church within civil society facilitate a new self-confidence of Catholics in the public life of liberal democratic polities. This is encouraging for the Church. However, there is a hidden danger in accepting the allocated public role of the Church as belonging within civil society, if civil society is understood as distinguished from the political and the economic. The danger is of a restriction which would prevent the Church from exercising its appropriate mission which includes addressing the political and socio-economic system as a whole. Granted the need to abide by a principle of restraint whenever engaging in public debate concerned with constraining the liberties of citizens, the Catholic Church would wish to have the kind of liberty as corporate citizen which would allow it address relevant issues without restriction. Rawls's later model of public reason, within broad political culture (public reason in the broad sense) against the background of the culture of civil society, is perhaps a better tool to allow for the Church's continuing dialogue with politics and economics as well as having a role in advocacy.

¹ *Gaudium et spes. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* edited by David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis, 2000), #1. Text in parentheses added, since the Bishops of the Council cannot be presumed to have wanted to exclude women.

² See Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New. Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 10.

³ Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelization in the Modern World* (1975) made this explicit: it linked evangelization to the struggle of peoples 'to overcome everything which condemns them to remain on the margin of life: famine, chronic disease, illiteracy, poverty, injustices in international relations and especially in commercial exchanges, situations of economic and cultural neo-colonialism sometimes as cruel as the old political colonialism. The Church, as the Bishops repeated (at their Synod), has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are her own children – the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization' (#30) In: *Catholic Social Thought*, p. 314.

⁴ See Herbert's remark that the Enlightenment critique of religion survives in some of the literature on civil society, David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society. Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 69.

⁵ The debates surrounding the candidature of John F. Kennedy for the presidency in the USA revealed the prevailing fear of the Catholic Church and of its suspected tendency to impose its views. Recent debates around the candidature of John Kerry echo this earlier fear, especially in relation to policy on abortion.

⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, second paperback edition 1996).

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990).

⁸ *Trust and Civil Society*, edited by Fran Tonkiss and Andrew Passey, with Natalie Fenton and Leslie C. Hems, foreword by Ralf Dahrendorf. (London: Macmillan/New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

⁹ John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ A recent issue (January 2005) on 'Corporate Social Responsibility' uses the term in this manner.

¹¹ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 71.

¹² Robert D. Putnam, with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹³ Raymond Plant, 'The Moral Boundaries of Markets', in *Ethics and the Market*, edited by Richard Norman, (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1999) pp. 9-25.

¹⁴ See for instance Mary Ann Glendon and David Blankenhorn, editors, *Seedbeds of Virtue: Sources of Competence, Character, and Citizenship in American Society*. (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1995).

¹⁵ David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society. Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

¹⁶ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 69-71.

¹⁸ See Audi's discussion of the principles which require self-limitation on the part of Churches and religious authorities when contributing to public debate: Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 163-4.

¹⁹ *Evangelization in the Modern World* #19, *Catholic Social Thought*, p. 310.

²⁰ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, second paperback edition 1996); 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited', *University of Chicago Law Review*, 64 (Summer 1997), subsequently reprinted in John Rawls, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999) and in John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). Citations are from this last edition.

²¹ John Rawls, 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited', p. 133.

²² *Ibid.* p. 149.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 172.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 142.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 143-4.

²⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 136-7.

²⁹ I think here of discussions such as those of Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and John M. Rist, *Real Ethics. Rethinking the Foundations of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).