

CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC ETHICS AND MODERN SOCIAL ANALYSIS

THEOLOGICAL ETHICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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Whitmore defines civil society as that public space where the varying understandings of the common good can engage one another. Structures that support the U.S. version of civil society include the limited state and voluntary associations, as well as given or received associations, in particular, religious associations. Several discursive traditions support the structural components and their specific combination in U.S. civil society. Some of these traditions of thought champion individual freedom and equality; some promote communal commitment. Both individual freedom and communal commitment are requisite in a lived culture for the well functioning of civil society. The weakening of the traditional ways of thinking and evaluating which have promoted communal commitment has led to a decay of U.S. civil society. Impelled by the requirements of the market and attempting to track the cyclical variations of the market, citizens must orient themselves to highly mobile lives. This mobility is the primary social condition that favors individual freedom and erodes engagement in communities. In an attempt to substitute for communal commitment in order to maintain conditions which make civil society possible, citizens use rights language to guide social interaction. The requirements of the market direct the state toward rights thinking away from habits of participation. In order to effectively and usefully contribute to public discourse at this juncture, Catholicism must "revitalize its concept of the common good." However, the contemporary adoption of rights language in Catholic social teaching may undercut its ability to contribute an account of the common good. Further, the general use of

rights language threatens to make futile the attempt by the bishops to introduce, in public discourse concerning abortion, language of the common good.

Michael Schuck takes up the ambivalent and challenging position of subsidiarity with respect to civil society. Civil society and subsidiarity are works of the imagination. Indeed, both the products and the activity of the imagination are historically shaped. At the origin of the modern age, although the outlines of civil society could be imagined, there was no such correlative imagining of subsidiarity. Once modern civil society had developed past its origins and once a widespread reflexivity concerning social structures emerged, subsidiarity came to be imagined. Yet at this same moment when subsidiarity was being imagined, civil society was subjected to grave stresses and would soon undergo future rapid changes. In the postmodern period, civil society has unravelled both socially and conceptually. The present situation requires a new conceptualization, a new group of cogent metaphors, indeed, a new imagination of how the structures of society may appear in the postmodern era. Given that modernity brought to birth the imagining activity which shaped civil society, the repeated, contemporary inclination to romanticism (a reaching back toward a premodern age) reflects the modern sense of loss for its offspring. In this situation one source for the work of those who are trying to reimagine the structures and space of contemporary society is the refiguration of what subsidiarity entails, a reimagination such as those that Sandel and MacIntyre offer. In this way a promising and necessary interchange can take place: new developments in presenting subsidiarity (see B. Manno and M. Maffesoli) can stimulate the reformulation of civil society. Likewise, a postmodern understanding of civil society and other "carrier concepts of subsidiarity" can facilitate the effective bearing of this principle of Catholic social teaching upon contemporary social issues. Finally, the renewed exercise of the imagination concerning civil society and subsidiarity must utilize an "ethnographic moment," because realism for the sake of the Gospel, a postmodern regard for variety and variation, the workings of creative fancy, and subsidiarity itself all require this attention to the usual living of citizens in all their distinctiveness.

William O'Neill, S.J., notes that the employment of modern rights language emerges as teleological conceptions of the common good succumb to modern criticisms. While avoiding both the cultural relativism found in some recent forms of eudaemonism and the danger of a formalism in the contemporary developments deriving from Kant, an internal critique of Rawls and Habermas promises to develop "a discursive retrieval of the common good for a postmodern, pluralist society." For, on the part of participants in a given society, autonomous choice directed by reason already manifests their common finalities. In this light, fundamental rights are directives for communicative practices, that is, they are goods for the whole of society so that it may achieve the public and committed discourse requisite for the maintenance and development of a society amidst differences. The required establishment of such rights constitutes "a common good of public reason." The deliberation that leads to contractual

commitments presumes the orientation of all participants to their common good. Reason in its publicness aims at the bringing about of the common good and revising the efforts to attain this. Here the common good is a distinctive arrangement of agential goods. The particular specification of the content of respect is ingredient to public reason. This points to the appropriateness of a theory of those virtues that sustain discourse.

Cathy Halvey examines the limits and promise of the category of civil society from the vantage of profound challenges and the accompanying changes in a subaltern region of the third world, specifically, Northeastern Brazil. Civil society in very recent years was a useful category in opening up both thinking and action in Eastern European regimes. It enabled private persons to raise ethical considerations about centralized authority. They became social agents apart from the dominating control of the state and were able, by dint of their reflection and activity in terms of and within the ambit of civil society, radically to reform the state. In South America, liberation theology served an analogous role in enabling citizens to conceive and articulate criticisms and ethical inquiries about the state and apart from principles deriving from the various national structures of legitimation. Liberation theology also enabled many from broad ranges of the culture to initiate their own activity in society. Recently, the concept of civil society is being imported into Latin America as a tool in social analysis and as a channel in the discourse about the unfolding of society. However, while civil society as a concept has bearing in a North Atlantic world where civil society emerged in a particular pattern of economic and cultural development, this pattern, of course, is not found in Latin America. Hence, the use of this idea does not provide intellectual purchase on the actual issues of regional inequalities and dominated cultures within many of the countries of this hemisphere. In fact, the category is being deployed in ways that obfuscate the consideration necessary for approaching the actual issues emerging in this region's development.

Peter Casarella explores the sacramental basis for a transformative vision in civil society when he considers eucharistic evangelization. Eucharistic evangelization offers Christ's incarnated loving action as a pattern for and stimulus to the transformation of civil society. It is an invested process by which participants "become and provide bread for the world." He considers the question whether the dialog that uses the vocabulary and grammar of eucharistic evangelization would block universal consideration. However, this sacramental and particularly eucharistic approach engages in a discovery, celebration, and encounter with the seeds of the Word that have been sown throughout the many natural and cultural ranges of social existence. Casarella sketches how eucharistic evangelization provides both a real distinction and a practical inseparability from the other forms of participation in civil society so that this reconstruction of a faith-based ethic is "both distinctively Christian and decidedly nonsectarian."

Conversely, the understandings of subsidiarity and community found in Catholic social teachings can shape eucharist evangelization so that its activities