Civil Society and Christian Social Thought

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Introduction

The idea of civil society has been put firmly back at the centre of British political debate as a result of the coalition government's commitment to the 'Big Society' agenda. The Big Society idea is contrasted with the supposedly Big State tendency of the previous Labour governments. As the government's website puts it:
the Big Society is about helping people to come together to improve their own lives. It's about putting more power in people's hands-a massive transfer of power from Whitehall to local communities.

After eighteen months of the new government it remains somewhat unclear whether Big Society is just another word for civil society. Certainly the engine room of the Big Society is a unit in central government called the 'Office of Civil Society'. Its site tells us that it
works across government departments to translate the Big Society agenda into practical policies, provides support to voluntary and community organisations and is responsible for delivering a number of key Big Society programmes.

These include the Big Society Bank, the National Citizenship Service Scheme, Community Organizers, and Community First.

There is evidently a wide degree of scepticism about the Big Society agenda at all points on the political spectrum. This is primarily because it has been launched at a time of severe austerity when precisely the organisations supposed to deliver that agenda are facing substantial cuts in public funding. I must leave that tempting problem aside in this lecture.

It is nevertheless clear that several strands of the Big Society agenda overlap at least partly with the agenda of those who want to champion something called 'civil society'. The sense of civil society I am using here is similar to that used widely in current debates. Roughly, it refers to the realm of independent, non-governmental and non-profit third sector organisations: NGOs, trades unions, churches, faith-based groups, etc. The civil society sector is typically contrasted with the state sector and the market sector. This three-sector model of society has its uses, and I broadly agree with civil society advocates who want to strengthen civil society against both the bureaucratic controls of the state and the corrosive commercial influences of the market. In this lecture, however, I will sometimes use the term more broadly (and somewhat against the stream) to include families, neighbourhoods, social enterprises and other bodies as well - in other words to refer to the entire realm of what are often called 'intermediate institutions' between state and individual.

I think it is helpful to stand back a bit from this local UK debate and take a wider

view of the idea of civil society. When we do that we see a broader, and rather more confusing, range of meanings attached to the term. And behind those meanings lie quite different political and moral priorities. As an American commentator on civil society, Christopher Beem, has rightly noted, the meanings given to the term depend crucially on what its protagonists want civil society to do. And to show how Christian social thought might make a contribution to European reflection on civil society I think it is helpful to look carefully at those meanings and priorities - to look at what advocates want to achieve culturally and politically when invoking the term civil society. Certainly the contribution of Christianity needs to be more than merely the mobilisation of churches to become one of many recipients of Big Society funding or its parallels in other European contexts - crudely, just putting out the begging bowl.

When we begin to survey the varieties of civil society thinking over the last generation or so we quickly become aware of very different discourses and much disagreement. An American writer Don Eberly, author of *The Essential Civil Society Reader* (2000), writes that, faced with so many contrasting views, the sceptic will wonder whether the concept has any substantive meaning at all or 'merely serves as a useful rhetorical cover for essentially the same ideological debate that has been taking place for decades'. I am not quite that sceptical. And in taking the measure of the idea we have to start somewhere. So to try to impose some order on this sprawling material I want to distinguish four distinct models of civil society that have shaped the debate in both Europe and North America over the last 40 years or so. I call them the oppositional, the protective, the integrative and the transformative models.

Four Models of Civil Society

1: the Oppositional Model

First, the oppositional model. The earliest wave of late twentieth-century civil society theorising emerged in Eastern Europe in the context of resistance to totalitarianism. The goal of those pioneers of 'civil society' was to carve out a sphere of free social initiative apart from the state, however small and fragile - in basements, coffee shops, theatres, informal (and often illegal) publishing networks. East Europeans invoked the notion of civil society to refer to a sphere of autonomous and 'self-limiting' popular deliberation and organisation; by 'self-limiting' they meant non-revolutionary, since that was the only available option. In this sphere, participants would think and act beyond the reach of the apparatus of the state, seek to defend the human rights of dissidents, workers, believers and others, and, perhaps, eventually mount democratic challenges to their oppressive regimes. We know the remarkable story since then: oppositional civil society groups played critical roles in mobilising popular and international support for the most far-reaching political transformation of the twentieth century.

A major challenge to this model, however, was what to do with the new freedom once it had been secured after 1989: how to move from a purely oppositional stance in which the state was the enemy to be challenged or at least circumvented, to a constructive stance made necessary when dissidents became governors. This was the challenge of postcommunist nation-building. Perhaps the lack of preparedness for that (which was entirely understandable) was part of the reason why postcommunist states

in the 1990s and 2000s were so vulnerable to the blandishments of neo-liberal market-based solutions offered from the USA, or in some cases to a rapid slide into oligarchic authoritarianism. The reality of civil society never fully died out under communism but it was drastically weakened and so unready for postcommunist reconstruction.

Yet we rightly applaud civil society organisations for contributing to the largely peaceful overthrowing of totalitarianism across most of Eastern Europe. It remains true that civil society can, and in some circumstances must, act as the locus of democratic resistance to authoritarianism. And that is the case across the world today, most recently, for example, in the Arab Spring, but also elsewhere. Consider, for example, the remarkable 2011 Reith Lectures by Aung San Suu Kyi - the recordings had to be smuggled out of Burma - telling the world the inspirational story of peaceful resistance in one of the world's most despotic regimes.

But I think we also recognise, as East Europeans like Václav Havel themselves did, that a view which sees civil society solely or mainly as a site of resistance to authoritarianism will only be able to take a society a few steps in the direction of stability and justice. It will rightly focus its attention on, for example, NGOs or social movements dedicated to blocking or exposing abuses of power but it will then need to also construct a more positive and long-term view of what a wide range of civil society institutions can offer to a flourishing society once freedom and peace are better secured, and of how they can best relate to the state.

2: the Protective Model

Second, the protective model. This model seems a long way from the first, and indeed it is, both conceptually and geographically. It is well represented in the book by Don Eberly I just mentioned: *The Essential Civil Society Reader*. In fact this book should probably be titled the essential US civil society reader: its contributors, and its agenda, are almost entirely American. One of the model's main intellectual inspirations is Alexis de Tocqueville, and there has emerged what can be called a distinctive 'neo-Tocquevillian' strand of civil society thinking which has achieved prominence in the USA. It is quite a diverse group, including, for example, communitarians such as Amitai Etzioni, sociologists of culture such as Robert Putnam, and social conservatives such as Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus.

Some will recall that in the 1970s, even before the term 'civil society' was back in currency, Berger and Neuhaus invoked the term 'mediating structures' in an influential pamphlet *To Empower People* (1977, revised edition 1996). They expressed deep and valid concern about the pervasive power of bureaucratic 'megastructures' such as the state, large business enterprises, and professional corporations, and urged a recovery of 'people-sized' institutions able to shield individuals from those megastructures and supply a vital source of subjective meaning and social values they fail to offer. Communitarians such as Etzioni later warned against the rapid depletion of community-sustaining values and recommended a range of policies aimed at empowering those neglected institutions and practices that alone can restore such values.

A principal concern of these American writers is the need to shore up, or recreate, certain small-scale institutions thought to be especially at risk under the sustained

pressures of advanced capitalism and individualist liberal democracy. Such institutions are, they claim, dangerously vulnerable to the predatory power of bureaucratic states and (at least for some) the corrosive effects of markets. This model, then, looks to the institutions of civil society to perform essentially protective or remedial functions: the renewal of threatened social bonds, the revival of social capital and the restoration of social cohesion. And its focus reflects, in turn, a conservative tendency to locate the principal source of social pathologies not first in politics or economics but in culture - the realm in which values and virtues are reproduced. Hence their special concern with value-producing institutions, and also their comparative lack of interest in political institutions and markets.

This focus leads to a certain type of definition of civil society. Here is Eberly's, for example: civil society is
that sector of society in which non-political institutions operate-families, houses of worship, neighbourhoods, civic groups, and just about every form of voluntary association imaginable.

Eberly also recognises that such institutions serve a wider purpose beyond themselves. They indirectly help sustain the economy and the polity, while also compensating for some of the deficiencies of both: they

mediate between the individual and the large mega-structures of the market and the state, tempering the negative social tendencies associated with each; create important social capital; and impart democratic values and habits.

I think the protective model is insightful as a reminder that humans can indeed only flourish if their lives are solidly rooted in what are sometimes deprecatingly called traditional institutions: family, neighbourhood, local associations, faith communities, and so on - institutions with a strong sense of shared identity and belonging and which inculcate in members a sense of the obligations of community. Indeed it seems that 'liberal' citizens - those equipped to exercise independent responsibility in society and politics - need to be nurtured in 'non-liberal' institutions (that is, institutions which are not founded solely on the idea of individual freedom but which are characterised by belonging, authority and tradition). There are ample grounds in Christian social thought to support this point.

But at the same time we do need to note an important criticism of the protective model, namely its relative neglect of politics. It fails fully to reckon sufficiently with the scale of the political interventions that may be required if such small-scale mediating structures are actually to do what proponents expect of them - interventions to address systemic economic inequality, for example, so that families are actually free to flourish and grow and not torn apart by poverty. The model's preoccupation with culture and its low expectations of political reform also seem to assume that mega-structures such as the state and large corporations cannot be significantly refashioned in such a way as to actually relieve the burdens they impose on fragile civil society institutions. We are simply stuck with them, and can only hope to carve out a few spaces of immunity around their edges. At least some versions of the continental European social market model (in Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, for instance), clearly suggest otherwise. It seems we need to look for a wider category of civil society institutions and a more complex view of their

relationship to the state.

3: the Integrative Model

The integrative model seems to offer such a wider view. This model calls for a much more intimate, more positive and mutually supportive relationship between civil society institutions and the state. One of the intellectual inspirations of this model is Hegel, and Charles Taylor and some European corporatists are contemporary advocates. But the model has been fed from a variety of sources, and, although it is perhaps the least well-recognised, it is probably the one closest to what has actually been happening in many European nations, including the UK at least since 1997. It seems to me that for all the neo-liberal rhetoric across Europe of the last thirty years, and several neo-liberal policy shifts, these integrative arrangements seem to have continued in some form throughout, albeit more so in continental Europe than in the UK. Even the Big Society agenda does not propose to do away with most of the regulatory controls on putative non-governmental service providers.

For adherents to the integrative model, civil society institutions will not flourish simply by being left to their own devices or just given money or legal protection by the state. Whatever their internal values, they also have a role in serving the purpose of political cohesion, and this requires them to be integrated closely into the public policy process. One example is the UK's Faith Communities Consultative Council set up in 2006. Taylor therefore suggests the need for a clearly political conception of civil society: a separate but not self-sufficient sphere, 'incorporated into the higher unity of the state', in which independent economic and other associations are integrated more or less closely into government. At the level of public policy, such integration would involve, Taylor says, an 'interweaving of society and government' in policy making. So while on the protective view, civil society is supposed to nurture social cohesion, on the integrative view a more important purpose of civil society is the achievement of political cohesion.

The recognition that civil society institutions are not self-sufficient but actually need the state-just as the state needs them-is, I think, a necessary complement to the de-politicised protective model. And it also finds strong support in Christian social thought, where the state has long been looked to as the unique integrator of the common good. Modern Christian social thought has only rarely been tempted by the minimal state of classical liberalism, even though it has also been wary of the big state of social democracy. It has recognised that civil society institutions cannot realise their own ends or contribute to the common good without some guidance from, and regulation by, and often funding from, the state. In fact it is probably true to say that, in social and economic policy, much modern Christian social thought seems closest to this model of civil society - certainly this would be the case for European Christian Democracy - even though it has also shared many of the concerns of the protective model.

Yet the integrative model has also been criticised for its tendency to lapse into a naïve view of bureaucratic direction. Integration of civil society institutions with public policy goals, however well-intentioned, can sometimes in effect mean incorporation into the state and thus a loss of proper independence - where they come to be mere service-delivery arms of the state. And let me add in passing that this is why churches

should also be cautious before enlisting themselves in relationships such as service-provider contracts with central or local government. The experience of New Labour showed the potential hazards of this, and the experience of Big Society might create new ones.

4: the Transformative Model

The fourth model of civil society is the transformative model. Among the leading intellectual inspirations for this model are critical theorists like Jürgen Habermas. Advocates of this model have in mind more ambitious state interventions than those of the integrativists. For some, transformative projects could imply a reconstruction of a whole political society. Most advocates, however, envisage less radical changes, although perhaps quite far-reaching ones nonetheless: the anti-globalisation movement, for example, which seeks a global civil society to counter the pernicious effects of deregulated globalised markets; or national or global environmental campaigns such as 350.org which seeks drastic reductions in our dependency on energy derived from fossil fuels.

American political theorists Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato are leading representatives of the transformative orientation. They view civil society as based on self-limiting democratizing movements seeking to expand and protect spaces for both negative liberty and positive freedom and to recreate egalitarian forms of solidarity without impairing economic self-regulation.

Although they do not envisage any wholesale transformation of society, they hold that the chief purposes of civil society are two: first, to empower resistance to political and economic subordination and injustice; and, second, to create a transformative space for democratic self-governance - a space in which autonomy and equality can be recreated, yet outside the bureaucratic state which promised these goals but failed to deliver them. (Here we see the inspiration of the early oppositional views of civil society on the transformative model).

Civil society is transformative in the sense that it functions as a site of 'self-constituting' democratic and egalitarian initiatives occurring relatively independently of the state and the economy, and operating beyond their imperatives. And it is also transformative in the sense that such initiatives will limit the excesses of political power and bring about significant political reform.

I already noted, when talking about the oppositional model, that it is important to see how quite a wide range of civil society institutions can function to resist authoritarian and oppressive governments. While such institutions may not be intrinsically political (churches, trades unions, for instance), they may have to rise to political roles in certain circumstances. Thus, for example, the role of the trades unions and the churches in resisting East European totalitarianism has been well documented. We might even say that families should be ready to rise to this political role: a strong family will be one in which children will be able to resist the ideological influences of the state, or, indeed, of the consumerist market.

The vulnerability of the transformative model, however, is that it risks viewing all components of civil society - even families, schools and religious groups - as

instrumental to larger political purposes. The danger is that it will overlook the fact that such smaller-scale bodies may actually have to be protected from being directly enlisted in political projects if they are to be themselves, and so be in any position at all to contribute indirectly, and more effectively, to wider social and political goals. If families or schools are seen as training grounds for political protest, children will, as the phrase has it, grow up too soon - or perhaps, not grow up at all.

These, then, are the four models. There are obviously other ways to organise civil society discourse, but this is a start. At various points I have already hinted in passing at how insights from Christian social thought may affirm or challenge elements of the four models. Let me elaborate that claim more fully.

Insights from Christian Social Thought

I want to suggest not only that Christian social thought today has useful insights to offer about civil society but that key foundations of what came to be known as civil society in Europe actually derived significantly from Christianity in the first place. There is always a risk of overstating this kind of historical claim: no one can sensibly doubt the enormous contribution of strands of Enlightenment thought to the consolidation of individual and associational freedom, or constitutionally limited government, for example. But, given our society's current deep historical amnesia about its very own origins, today we need to lay the emphasis on recovering attention for the neglected legacy of Christianity. Let me quote Charles Taylor on the point, who pays tribute to what he calls a 'key medieval insight', namely that 'society is not identical with its political organization'. In fact it is a patristic insight - it was one of the central insights of Augustine's social thought. Taylor notes that this insight was sharpened further by the emergence of the organisational independence of the church, which gave rise to what he calls a 'crucial differentiation, one of the origins of the later notion of civil society, and one of the roots of western liberalism'.

As classical civilisation unravelled, the appearance of the new phenomenon of the church - a historically unprecedented institution asserting a trans-political, transcendent, origin and authorisation - forever changed the nature of Western political thought and practice, and its view of civil society. Now Western society was confronted with the reality of two independently constituted and mutually limiting communities; the political community was no longer the final horizon of social experience. The effect of this was nothing less than what Eric Voegelin has called the 'de-divinization of politics'.

This is well-stated in a seminal article by Catholic philosopher John Courtenay Murray, entitled 'Are there two or one?' (in *We Hold These Truths*, 1960). Murray took the argument further, showing how the assertion of the independent authority of the church over against the state in time paved the way for the later assertion of the independent authority of many other spheres of human life. I think we can broaden Murray's historical account yet further to include institutions such as the orphanage, the monastic community, the university, the town, the guild; and, in the modern period, the profession, the trades union (which Leo XIII dignified by saying it had a 'natural right' to exist), the business enterprise, the charitable association, the school,

the cultural association and yet more. All such institutions came in time to be seen as exercising independent moral, even religious, responsibility under God to serve the neighbour.

This idea was picked up and radicalised in the Reformation, especially in its Calvinist wing, which developed a highly distinctive associational theory, emerging when the belief in the 'priesthood of all believers' (all could exercise independent spiritual responsibility in the community of the church and before God) began to spill outside the church and into society generally.

These many institutions of what we now call 'civil society' came to be seen as playing indispensable roles in resisting the excesses of both individualism and statism. For example, in the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius XI argued two things: first, he warned of a decomposition of vital intermediate institutions under the corrosive influence of individualism; second, he laid down officially for the first time the crucial anti-statist principle of 'subsidiarity'-or, more strictly, the principle of 'the subsidiary function of the state'-which holds that it is a 'grave injustice' (and not just an administrative inconvenience) for higher social bodies to usurp the proper functions of lower bodies wherever the latter can adequately fulfil them. This assertion of the autonomy of civil society always went hand in hand with a strong affirmation of the principle of 'solidarity' (the duty of all to all) and the priority of the common good over private or sectional interests. John Paul II later summed up the social vision implied by these notions thus, in *Centesimus Annus* (1991) (§13):
the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in various intermediary groups, beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good.

There are many other modern and contemporary Christian sources that could be mentioned here as contributors to this broad vision of the person, civil society, and state. Let me simply summarise five key principles which underlie this vision and which, I suggest, are still highly important today:

- the created sociability of human nature, and the natural human propensity toward, and need for, rich contexts of community and association;
- the plurality of distinct institutional arenas in which this sociability comes to expression, from family to state (and beyond), the independence of which must be honoured by the state;
- the need for a realm of individual and institutional freedom, going beyond any particular institutional affiliation, in which people can responsibly and creatively explore and pursue their legitimate human callings and collective goals; this is to include a strong protection of religious freedom, both of individuals and of institutions, as well as many other core 'human rights';
- a positive role for the state in securing the conditions necessary to advance justice and the common good, including, crucially, a leading role in the supporting, coordinating, and regulating of the institutions of civil society and in the curtailing of their damaging effects;
- the need for democratic space to engage in collective political action, both within and against the state, to urge the state and other institutions toward their responsibilities for justice and the common good.

Let me conclude. You will notice that that this five-point summary echoes key insights in each of the contemporary models sketched earlier: the protective concern with the integrity of certain specific forms of people-sized institution; the integrative concern with the coordinating role of the state toward civil society institutions, especially larger economic ones, and toward markets; the oppositional and transformative aspiration to challenge entrenched structures of injustice either at the level of civil society (the patriarchal family or the authoritarian religious group) or at the national or global levels (coercive corporations or markets). A contemporary Christian understanding of civil society must learn from and integrate all such insights. Yet it has its own distinctive resources to bear, as well as a long, albeit mixed, history of attempts to put these ideas into practice. As European societies continue to struggle under the weight both of overly bureaucratic states and of corrosive markets, each of which encroach routinely and intrusively into areas beyond their proper sphere, I think Christians can contribute to debates about civil society with confidence and with a conviction that they do have something authentic and fresh to offer to the common good.

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