

Corruption and the Role of Religion in Public Life

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This essay, written at the behest of the agency responsible for developing an anti-corruption ethos in South African governance, including the public service, focuses on the logic of the separation of religion from the public sphere in modern democracies (and challenges this logic as incoherent and unhelpful), comment on its implications for our contemporary situation while making some claims about the pertinence of religion, and then pursues the question of the appropriate role of religion in public life in relation to the issue of corruption.

The role of religion in public life is contested territory, sometimes to the point of a desire to separate the two things entirely. This is particularly true where a society opts for a political system which accepts a plurality of religions and privileges none. Modern democracies are like that, and ours is no exception as it develops and grows.

Yet the problems that arise when religion is treated merely as obscurantist, retrograde, archaic or, at best, something for persons in their interior lives rather than something of significance in the public sphere, have in recent times become more evident—notwithstanding the long popularity of what has been called secularism. The country most keen to see a separation between religion and the state, for example, and thus between religion and public institutions, has been the USA. Its constitution is radical in this respect, as most people will know.

It is here, however, that a positive flood of literature has been emerging in the nineties, much of it from perspectives that are not intrinsically religious, as agencies of all kinds try to unpack and reshape polity and practice where it is failing—the point being that so much is seen to be failing as the classical institutions of civil society erode in the face of market forces and multiple “publics”,¹ and health, welfare and educational systems are increasingly deprived of public monies.

We are in a different context. We have a different history and a different demographic make-up. We have different opportunities too. How then do we make the most of them? To what extent is religion a problem to be side-lined or side-stepped in public life? To what extent is it a potential to be harnessed and developed?

The Idiosyncratic Character of a Public Religion

¹ In recent years, this plurality of publics has been discussed in relation to the so-called “culture wars” which have undermined the “traditional” American white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethos and torpedoed the classic American notion of the “melting pot” nation..

Religion, it is often said—in both colloquial discourse and in formal debates in our public institutions—should stick to what it knows best and leave both politics and economics to those whose business that is. From some religious quarters this sentiment would also receive support, on the grounds that religion should not get its hands dirty in the compromises and corruptions of political and economic life.

Public space, of course, is heavily shaped by politics and economics. The tendency, ipso facto, therefore, is to privatize religion, to move it out of the public space on the grounds that it is irrational, or at best, that its rationality is private and personal. Unless, of course, it becomes useful to recall religion for particular purposes which the rationalities of the state and of markets are unable effectively to address!

Thus the call to religious institutions in South Africa to involve themselves in the moral renewal of the country. By this is meant primarily that religious institutions and movements should involve themselves in the formation of character—using their rhetoric and rituals to promote the virtues and values that good citizenship requires. By this it is also acknowledged that the instruments of political and economic life are not well suited to doing this job. They have other rationales and ends. Yet they need the job done.

At the same time, insufficient thought is given to what this might mean, especially if one begins with the fair premise that religious institutions and movements have a life of their own not necessarily bound to the goals of the state or the market, and if one complicates this fact by noting that religious movements and institutions are unlikely, in general, to accept a role defined by states and markets in terms of *their* interests.

There is an inherent contradiction in the dual tendencies to isolate and privatize religion on the one hand, and to call it into service for particular public needs on the other. Even if we do not share the history of Europe in the separating out of religion from the public sphere, we often adopt the same logic.

Religion, moreover, cannot be located simply in notions of personal faith independent of its organizational or communal frameworks. It will always be manifested in institutions and movements, for this is the internal logic of most systems of belief, even those that ostensibly deal primarily with an individual's journey of faith (as in Buddhism, for example).

We may go further, to note that religion is deeply implicated in culture. An alien visiting our world and reading the local daily press campaign for a new civic identity in Cape Town through the slogan "One City, Many Cultures," would have to conclude that what we humans mean by culture is religion. All the central moments of human existence—from birth to death—are bound up for most people with religious rituals, however conceived. A culture of public morality, a virtuous citizenry, cannot be divorced from such realities.

Nor can culture itself be treated as secondary to political and economic processes, as any good analyst who goes beyond mere positivistic or empirical theories of states and markets will know. Indeed, most current cutting-edge theories of corporate management are trying to take cultural

(“human”) factors into account as key to their future competitiveness, performance and efficiency.

The problem is exacerbated in the South African context by the legacy of the past decades. Apartheid was not only a human rights problem; it was also a human problem, in this sense, that it tore apart countless families and communities whose fabric should have provided for the formation of moral character. Such moral formation would normally come through parents and a stable extended family, through communal norms built upon long years of common experience, through local authority figures who could embody desired and desirable ways of being in the world—and thus, it must be said, through figures, symbols, images and practices imbued with one or other kind of religious quality. We have at least a thirty year vacuum, much more in many cases, of such moral formation of character and virtue where values appropriate to a new citizenship could be crafted and honed.

Leaving aside apartheid, we are in the same boat as many others in facing the effects of an industrial and now increasingly high-tech economy at the core of our society, driving the periphery with it. The social effects of changes in the mode and dynamics of production, consumption and distribution of goods under these conditions include a powerful tendency to promote individualism, as is well attested in the sociological literature. Couple this to an increasingly consumerist epoch and a general difficulty in the face of globalizing pressures, including exposure to a bewildering multiplicity of values and a befuddling array of sources of information, then we should not be surprised to see the traditional wellsprings of moral authority and character formation being significantly eroded.

Contemporary social critics see another source of moral confusion in the ubiquitous capacity of television, in particular, to “create reality” through the juxtaposition of images and sounds in ways that no longer allow us to judge what is real and what is not, who is in the right and who not, and how we are to decide anyway—unless we allow the producer of the particular show we are watching to act as our high priest of reality. That news is a show as well is not hard to demonstrate, even if some broadcasters are less wedded to viewing rates and commercial criteria than others.

In sum, many of the key institutions necessary to develop the kind of virtues and values we need if we are to find a binding “civil religion” for our society are in crisis. These include a variety of forms of association which must function as the seed beds of civic virtue if there is to be any such thing: The family, the local community or neighbourhood, the school, faith communities and religious institutions, voluntary organizations, arts (poets, musicians, graffiti artists, painters, etc.) and art institutions, local government, work places and the media.

Laws and regulations do not in themselves engender values and virtues, though they may police them and promote them. On the contrary, law and law-making are the results of social decisions made about the kinds of values and virtues a society wants to see itself regulated by. The values and virtues enshrined in our Constitution thus have no practical foundation, nor can they be altered towards greater freedom, dignity and responsibility in the future, without being rooted in the variety of forms of human association. Religion is intrinsically and powerfully part of this

mix, and it does us little good to march to the tune of struggles fought centuries ago in Europe over the place of religion in society under conditions that do not match ours.

In short, the social roots of moral formation are undermined when religion, whether in institutional, communal or ad hoc form, is formally privatized to such an extent that private morality can easily be separated from public morality. At its most banal yet profound level, this truth may be glimpsed in Hannah Arendt's famous study of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi death camp leader, whose personal family life was a model of harmony, care and virtue, yet who could so readily oversee the deaths of others.²

In what follows we will briefly focus on the logic of the separation of religion from the public sphere in modern democracies, comment on its implications for our contemporary situation, and then pursue the question of the appropriate role of religion in public life in relation to the issue of corruption.

The Logic of Separation

Modern democratic states generally distinguish between government and religion, between law and faith, between "rational argument" (ostensibly universal, thus available to all) and "normative claims" (presumably parochial, thus tending to divisive particularities). The historical grounds for doing so, in the classic tradition, lie in the European religious wars of the period in which mercantile capitalism, later to evolve into industrial capitalism, replaced the feudal economies of Europe.

The wars were fueled by religious argument and legitimized through religious dogma. In this case, Christian Protestant fought Christian Catholic for decades, laying waste to large parts of European society. Intellectuals in the vanguard of the movement against this kind of religious authority, were appalled by the way in which religion was used to sustain and promote division. They became convinced, along with the rising bourgeoisie who would lead the attack on the old aristocracies and promote the formation of the new "parliaments of the people", that religion was inherently irrational, and that human reason, acting through argument, offered the only viable alternative and the necessary salvation. The very discipline we now call sociology itself began originally with Auguste Comte's critical analysis of the role of the priesthood in sustaining the authority of religious leaders in the face of the movements of enlightenment and emancipation which marked the West at this time.

Thus arose the separation between religion and state in the Western context—on the back of a fundamental suspicion of religion. This is what has commonly been referred to as secularism. While this history is specifically that of Europe, it has had broader impact in democracies worldwide in the writing of constitutions and the establishment of the institutions of society. Not every society, by any means, adopts a similar attitude to the relationship between religion and society at large, and in Africa, at least, the separation of religion out of the public or common sphere of life is culturally alien.

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, NY: Viking, 1964.

Yet the forces at work in mediaeval Europe, albeit altered in their constellation and conjunctural character, continue to impact on societies such as ours. There is also some good logic in this, as any society which consists in a significant plurality of groups with differing life-worlds—and how many societies are left that do not?—is better off, history tells us, not privileging one life-world over others if it wants to avoid the kind of conflict that can no longer be regulated without war. And, as Jürgen Habermas has reminded us, violence begins where discourse—the capacity to resolve conflicts through debate, argument and understanding—ends.

Thus our own constitution separates religion and the state. Government generally—necessarily acting on the basis of laws and regulations which bear no reference to religious norms or mandates—has difficulty seeing that religion has any role in public life other than a moral one, or one of welfare service. In essence, the privatization of religion—no matter what tradition we are speaking of—is an assumption of the way our society is currently constituted. The public space, it is assumed, must be opened to secular and rational argument in the first place, and if religions are able to relate to such a public space, well and good. A political party such as the African Christian Democratic Party can be tolerated, even if it is seen as suspect for its overtly religious character, as long as it plays by the rules of secular, rational argument, and as long as it does not represent an attempt to impose its religious view of the world upon all. Fundamentalist parties or groups who refuse to acknowledge the rules, and thus the authority of the existing state, are anathema. There is good sense in this, of course, as long as the state does in fact represent a broadly based consensus of the plurality of groups and life-worlds in a society.

Do We Need a “Civil Religion”?

At the same time, talk of “rainbow nations” or an “African renaissance” necessarily introduces another dimension. Both terms, and any and all analogous language, reach for some foundation upon which to cohere a set of values and virtues that a plural society can give assent to, and offer energy and resources to. They are terms of a desired civil religion without which, it is deemed, society will implode or become uncontrollably anarchic.³ In a society bedeviled by high levels of inequality and poverty, the lack of such a coherent and cohering set of values and virtues also tends strongly to leave power and privilege in the hands of the few—another recipe for instability and violence.

It is in this context, where we have as yet no binding vision, no coherent set of values, and little evidence of the necessary virtues on which to build a whole and healed society, that Thabo Mbeki has spoken of fraud and corruption as affecting “the soul,” a religious metaphor of course, of our society; and of the challenge we face as being first and foremost “spiritual.”⁴ Whatever Mbeki may mean by this, it suggests that religious qualities of some sort are necessary to society, and not just to persons or local communities of faith. It is tied to the question of trust: a trust about honouring values and respecting the other upon which must rest social institutional arrangements if they are to be more than technicist instruments governed by managerial

³ The term “civil religion” is problematic, and even its originator in contemporary social theory, Robert Bellah, is no longer enamoured of it; yet I will use it here as a shorthand term for the set of values, virtues, symbols, images and rituals which a nation seeks to establish to bind society together.

⁴ Deputy President Thabo Mbeki’s Budget Speech, Cape Town, 1997.

imperatives of efficiency and control.⁵ Such trust cannot be bought. It must be won—not in war, but in respect for life-worlds. And much of what makes up the life-worlds of large numbers of our populace is religious in quality if not in name.

From another angle, then, this time more directly related to the questions of fraud and corruption—a form of the breaking of social trust—we are back at the question of the role of religion. Perhaps one other way of describing what is required for the necessary ethical foundations of society lies in the concept of the person. The term prevents us from considering human beings merely as commodities or isolated individual ciphers, and it suggests that human beings, in relation to one another (that is, in society), only emerge into the foreground of our social arrangements when particular histories, beliefs, virtues, values, goals and actions are included in our judgements.

In short, notwithstanding Adam Smith and Karl Marx, life-world questions are as crucial to a modern society as are questions having to do with the social system imperatives of money (markets) and power (the state). Where these life-world questions have been down-graded or ignored, societies have paid the price in conflict, terrorism, war—and a denuding of the moral character of its citizenry which would sustain a healthy society. Rape, assault, murder, theft, fraud, corruption, and a general disrespect of other members of society (and one may add, of the environment within which lives with others) then becomes difficult to combat, whatever the legal instruments at one's disposal.

The common cultural bases for giving flesh to the Constitution are missing; the covenant, to use a religious term which has relevance for any plural democracy, which citizens must make with each other and with society is in danger if it is at all present. Multiple direct and indirect effects may be seen where this happens, including our capacity to build trust with other nations and societies, to develop confidence in our economic productivity and discipline, to establish reliable public institutions, to implement good policies and to secure the confidence of the populace in the future of the country.

Multi-Layered Solutions

All of this suggests that corruption is a symptom of a general malaise in the body politic. Of course, corruption is part of the human condition historically. It is not something new. We all know that. But where it becomes endemic, where it becomes an identifying mark of a society or its institutions, where it flourishes and is not checked, it raised profound questions about the nature and foundations of that society itself. This is our problem, even if it is in part one we have inherited from the past.

It cannot be addressed piece-meal, for it is not corruption itself that is key, but the character of the society we are building. It cannot be separated, as our current leadership recognizes, from the economic conditions that promote anti-social behaviour and practices, nor from political

⁵ This point has been forcefully made by Geoff Mulgan of the Demos Think-Tank, UK, which acts as consultant to major European corporations, NGOs and governments, in his "Introduction" to *Life After Politics: New Thinking for the Twenty-First Century*, London: Fontana, 1997.

processes that do not demonstrate the will to clean house within our public institutions. Neither, I would argue, can it be dealt with unless civic participation in democracy is enhanced in ways that build good citizenship, and cultivate those aspects of religious or cultural traditions that can reinforce the values of public life.

Religious institutions and movements have a role here. So does government and business. There is a tendency, hardly new, to see the key to the organization of society as lying in the hands of the politicians and the entrepreneurs, the parties and the business elites. In the language of Cohen and Arato,⁶ states and markets, to which correspond political society and economic society, are dominant under modern conditions of democracy, especially since the demise of strong socialist blocs (given the enigmatic exception of China, itself increasingly part of the global market system anyway). Insufficiently resourced and recognized has been the importance of the movements and institutions of civil society. They include religions and their embodiments.

It would be a mistake to see civil social movements and institutions as a panacea—indeed, political and economic leaders are hardly likely to do so!—and it would be a mistake not to acknowledge that civil society includes many reactionary and retrogressive elements which harm rather than enhance the prospects of a whole and healed society. This is as true of religious bodies as it is of others.

It would also be a mistake, however, to ignore the importance of civil social institutions and movements in generating, sustaining and developing the kind of civic virtues and values society needs if it is to counteract corruption and the like. This would imply that both states and markets should pay considerably more attention to making available the resources they control, inevitably far larger in terms of power and money than civil society, to strengthen civil society appropriately.

There is a *quid pro quo* here. One cannot simply call for religious bodies to do their bit for society (“think of what you can do for your country, not for yourself”) without simultaneously according those same bodies the kind of seriousness as sectors of civil society that one demands they give to the needs of society at large. The Roman Catholic social ethical tradition of subsidiarity has relevance here. Allow what can be done at “lower,” more local levels of society to be done there, giving it support both politically, legally and materially, and do not attempt to centralize this in any way other than through mechanisms that promote accountability, cross-fertilization and communication. Perhaps then the needed formation of values and virtues among citizens would gain strength in practical ways, bound to the social interest as a whole rather than bound to particular confessional or parochial communities.

As we have noted before, the qualities necessary for citizenship and self-governance take shape through exposure to certain moral ideas about the human person and the nature of the good life, and these come from a variety of forms of human association. These moral ideas and person-to-person associations constitute the seedbeds of civic virtue, whatever else they may be about, wherever they are concerned with moral formation and with the ends of living well together in just institutions.

⁶ Cohen, Jean & Arato, Andrew, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

Common sense suggests that religious, cultural and other communities have a particular role to play here—and a responsibility. Norms and moral sanctions have to be rooted in persons as much as in institutions if they are to have deep and lasting effects. Of course, not all norms and moral positions enhance a genuinely public life in a plural society, as we have already noted. It is equally important, therefore, to promote processes and institutional encounters through which we may clarify those virtues and shared commitments that are necessary to public life.

The “civic truths” of democracy are largely constitutional and procedural, and though they establish principles of justice for a plural, free society, they do not tell us how to live the good life. A democracy may need “moral truths” if it is to be healthy and just. But the rooting of such moral truths is not self-evident, even within religious traditions. Religious institutions and the like will thus have to be encouraged to go beyond moralizing, preaching, proclamation and other forms of speaking to their own publics, or out of their own corners, to imaginatively construct new ways—or creatively reconstruct old ways!—of embodying a commitment to building a moral citizenry. This would not imply giving up the strengths and identity of particular traditions, but it would imply a commitment to an open, non-exclusive character of citizenship.

In a deeply unequal society, where the damages of the past remain so painfully evident, such a commitment must include a recognition of the marginalization of large numbers of our people. The virtues and values that urgently need to be promoted, therefore, include that of paying attention to the experiences and the voices of those who are marginalized from the centres of power, privilege and influence. This is not only a moral imperative if we are to build a sound democracy, it is also a political imperative and an economic one.

Margaret Thatcher’s reported vision of a “fifty percent society,”⁷ a vision which appears to have gained widespread international acceptance in practice even if others would not as boldly proclaim it, cannot be any kind of foundation for a whole and healthy society. The claims of those normally marginalized by the forces of modernization or the structures of dominant powers must be foregrounded at least as much as any other, both because of the otherwise subjugated knowledges they represent and because these knowledges often contain a store of local, appropriate practical experience and wisdom necessary to the building of the moral fibre of a society.

It is at this point that religious institutions and movements in South Africa become particularly important. It is not for nothing that Zionist Christians, with their strong moral codes and disciplined practices, are sought out by employees and trusted by colleagues. One may extrapolate from this to argue that there are in fact many local sources and resources for building the moral fibre of the nation we need. This needs careful attention and detailed analysis from the point of view of those who call for moral regeneration.

Once again, it raises the question of the potential or religion within society, notwithstanding the problems that religion also poses. Insufficient clarity exists on this point. But in the example of the Zionist Christian movement does make the point again, that religious world-views and

⁷ In which it is argued that as long as fifty percent of a society are satisfied, the other fifty percent can largely be ignored given the reduced needs for labour power in the globalizing economy and the information age, and the extensive tools and technologies available for managing any resulting conflict.

traditions are often central to the life-worlds of particular persons or groups, that they more often than not make quite direct claims upon persons in the practical negotiation of relationships in civil, political and economic society, and that they provide for the values and virtues which are essential to civic life.

Conclusion

Religious institutions may well enter into public life by obstructing the development of civil society rather than encouraging it. The very contradictions they usually represent within their own tradition-specific heritage—as appears in the divisions between denominations, between mission and indigenous churches, between conservative and progressive theories and practices, between conflicting interpretations of sacred texts or foundational creeds—often function to inhibit a constructive role in the public sphere.

Moreover, the insertion of religious institutions in civil society remains unstable for several reasons. First, many religious institutions are unclear about their role in the public sphere. Second, they are often marginalized within their own public contexts, both ecclesially in the ecumène and socially in the polis. Third, civil society requires normative integration and open-ended communication and these practices are frequently institutionalized for pragmatic and strategic reasons in new, non-religious or non-traditional ways.⁸ Fourth, civil society contains its own negativities and deformations; it can degenerate into a mess of private interests and factions. Fifth, civil society itself is threatened by the imperatives of politics (power) and economy (money).

Having said all that, however, religious communities have quite a lot to do with offering the resources for the patterns of normative integration and open-ended communication that are necessary foundations of civil society. We may see this by reference to the more general significance of a particular kind of civil society envisioned by Václav Havel, as summarized by Jean Elshtain,⁹ that “one must begin from the bottom, from the humbly respected boundaries of the natural world, rather from behind a veil of ignorance where one enacts a project of justice as a noumenal moment.”¹⁰ This calls for a “thick description” of moral life together.

A “thick description” of moral life in the public sphere, Elshtain tell us, depends not on a kind of rationality abstracted from the particular, but on bonds of affection, the imitation of significant others who embody or express ‘how it is to live,’ on stories which narrate the point of a moral life together—“narratives of possibility” rather than of closure which help us to see the vitality and importance of everyday life, “the connection of small events to wider streams of life and thought.”¹¹ For Elshtain, such a theory is the necessary foundation of political life

⁸ See Adam Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

⁹ Jean Elshtain, “Political Theory and Moral Responsibility,” forthcoming.

¹⁰ The reference to a “veil of ignorance” points to the theory of justice offered by John Rawls, in which some universalized general principles, derived from a consideration of a context-free idea of the ideal society, operationalize what we mean by justice. In this framework, a contextually derived notion of justice is prohibited, except in the (dubious) sense in which Rawls thinks his universal norms may be assented to by any human being who thinks about his or her true interests.

¹¹ Elshtain, *op. cit.* “Narratives of closure” are those which freeze history and politics into theories in which everything is known in advance, all categories are specified, and all the possibilities are laid out.

We are not consigned in this view to fate nor to the impotence of those who only wait for God. The engagement of religious communities in the construction of the values, virtues and practices of civil society is a moral task as much as it is a public one. As Cohen and Arato put it: “It is on this terrain that we learn how to compromise, take reflective distance from our own perspective so as to entertain others, learn to value difference, recognize or create anew what we have in common and come to see which dimensions of our tradition are worth preserving and which ought to be abandoned or changed.”¹² With this vision in mind, embodied in practice and encouraged in principle, religious communities may well have something to offer in response to the call to regenerate the moral fibre of our nation.

¹² Cohen and Arato, *op. cit.*, p. 23.