

Of Religion and Theology in a Civil Society

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Religious convictions and ways of seeing reality have their own independent impact, in the case of the World Trade Center towers a very visible, clearly material, and highly symbolic impact all at once. This has given rise to new discussions on religion in society, in the public sphere. To think again of theology, and religion, in the public place, in the market square, I focus on the lens offered by the idea of civil society, to highlight some important challenges to theology in our time, in dialogue with the African context, and with the work of people such as Mahmood Mamdani, Cohen and Arato, Jürgen Habermas, Jean Bethke Elshtain. Questions about the ecclesia and the believing /acting /responsible human being emerge clearly. I end by claiming that responsible theological reflection seeks to break open new possibilities amidst the limits of present actualities. It partakes of what is to come, refuses to possess the truth, supports the struggle of human beings to actualize themselves, takes its stand against suffering, and incorporates the other in just institutions and ways of living well together. I argue that it is not difficult to test our thought and our action against criteria, or thereby to grasp the task of religion, or practical faith, in civil society.

*From
all stockades of provincial mind
all walled villages devoted to the defensive life
all regal certainty that shatters the world into outsiders and insiders
Let me go from captivity into freedom*

Ross Snyder, *Inscape*

*“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” the Queen remarked.
Lewis Carroll, Ch. V, *Through the Looking Glass**

As I write, the world confronts what the President of the United States has boldly called a “war against terrorism.” Some describe it as the possible beginning of a third world war of a kind, and yet others regard as a war of terrorism in itself.¹ The leaders of the notorious Al-Qaeda network implicated in the horrific attacks in New York and Washington have another way of describing it, echoing the thesis of Samuel Huntington—as a clash of civilizations, Islam against Christianity (Judaism as well).

It is far too early, speaking historically, to understand or grasp just what these times mean. It is to be hoped that the attempts of many people of faith to undercut any definition of this

¹ Here in South Africa, for example, this is how the head of the Muslim Judicial Council, a leader of the Congress of Trade Unions, and the regional director of the Western Cape Council of Churches, have described American and British attacks on Afghanistan in the declared hunt for Osama bin Laden; instead they call for a coalition against war and terrorism, and poverty. See *Cape Times*, Wed. Oct 10, 2001.

present conflict in terms of a war between faiths will succeed over the long haul. Yet it is difficult to avoid hearing the echoes of the Enlightenment ringing in the background, specifically, the deep suspicion about the capacity of religious people and communities to provide any secure future for humankind, a suspicion—often turned into determined antipathy—occasioned by the way in which wars and horrible deeds are enacted and legitimated on all sides in the name of the sacred, though they are as much about perfectly material interests (whether economic, political or cultural).

Perhaps, then, at the beginning of the twenty-first century we may once again ask: Does religion have a positive role to play in public life? Or is it intrinsically negative, whatever good contributions ordinary religious people make to their local communities, by virtue of what Jacques Derrida has called the “threat” of community—its inherent drawing of boundaries against the Other through what one describe as “auto-immunity”?² In the case of religious communities, these boundaries take on the potent and dangerous character of the sacred itself, defining in the process those who are, and who are not, God’s children.

If religion in this sense has a suspect future, it is only one step further to ask if theology, the reflection of a community on its faith, has a future. Is its memory, its recollection and recapitulation of a tradition, of the poor sort that only work backwards? Is it the last refuge of provincial minds and a defensive life out of which regal certainties flow to be imposed upon the other? Or does it forego its stockades, its walled villages, as Snyder suggests. Is McGaughey right when he says that “The profound paradox of our circumstance is that as individuals and communities, we are a spiritual project in a material world. We are a spiritual odyssey of faith seeking understanding in order that we may act in ways that are enhancing, liberating, and healing.”³

Theology remains an ongoing reality inside a particular faith community; it will not disappear as long as faith communities exist. But, as the reflective practice of believers or believing community, it is often blinded by its internal logic and un-interrogated assumptions to the realities of the world within which it is situated, to the presence of the other who does not belong. Think of how theology entered into Black South African reality in the missionary era: As Jean and John Comaroff show in their study on the encounter of the Tshidi tribe of the Batswana with the early missionaries, their relationship, fraught with incompatible constructions of power and knowledge, produced a profound conflict of interpretations over the meaning, status and direction of Christian claims, all in the context of an avowedly political and material struggle.⁴

The conflicts of our world, even if articulated in the medium of religious language and argument, have as much if not more to do with resource questions, with material deprivation, with economic inequality and political injustice, as anything else. It would be naïve to reduce them to doctrinal or other religious fundamentals. Yet religious convictions and ways of seeing reality do have their own independent impact as well, in the case of the World Trade Center towers a very visible, clearly material, and highly symbolic impact all at once. To think again of theology, and religion, in the public place, in the market square, I would like to focus on the lens offered by the idea of civil society. Admittedly a narrow lens, its range of vision limited both by the inherent slipperiness of the concept and by its history, it still enables us to highlight some important challenges to theology in our time.

² Jacques Derrida, in Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998, 42-44, 53.

³ Douglas R. McGaughey, *Christianity for the Third Millennium: Faith in an Age of Fundamentalism and Skepticism* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998), p.10.

⁴ Jean & John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 199?? & ??

On Religion and Civil Society

At a lecture in 1997 at Oxford, Nelson Mandela noted that Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama had five hundred years before set out around Africa “in search of Christians and spices.”⁵ His journey, to South Africa among other places, was not the first imprint of Christianity on Africa—the earliest churches were established in North Africa long before much of western Europe could be regarded, in its later language, as “civilized.”⁶ Da Gama’s voyage did signal, however, the arrival on the African continent of the forces of modernity through the processes of conquest and colonization. The impact upon African peoples of this development is well-documented and needs no comment here. Mandela interrogates that history by provocatively asking “... whether our generation has the capacity to close the circle on these five centuries.”

Mandela sees religion as a necessary part of the transformation required. Noting that strong “inter-religious solidarity in action against apartheid, rather than mere harmony or co-existence, was crucial in bringing that evil system to an end,” he suggests that interaction and cooperation between “the three great religions of Africa [Islam, Christianity, African Traditional Religions] ... could have a profound bearing on the social space we create for the rebirth of our continent,” perhaps even assisting in the establishment of a world order “based on mutual respect, partnership and equity.”

The possibility of these three religions (or any other) contributing to the social space necessary for renewal in Africa raises the question about the relationship between religion and society, or more narrowly, civil society; hence between Christian churches and civil society.⁷

Civilizing Africa: A Colonial Curse or a Double Emancipation?

A hermeneutic of suspicion is inevitable when an African is confronted by the demand to pay attention to “civil” society. Africa has in the past been viewed by mainstream Northern cultures as “uncivil,” more recently as “undeveloped.” “Civil” society, with its roots in European cultural constructs and ideologies, was a concept that accompanied the “civilizing” mission of European colonial representatives. This left a negative heritage whose effects are still apparent.⁸ Thus a call to civil society evokes deep suspicion in Africa, especially as a rallying cry against “tribalism,” “nepotism,” “reactionary traditionalism,” or other similar epithets favoured by critics of Africa.

The suspicion must remain given the genealogy of the concept, located as it is historically and sociologically in a specific class discourse, and philosophically in the nexus of western national and imperial epistemologies.⁹ But suspicion alone will not resolve the question of how we might define practical relationships of political and economic life in the context of the plural lifeworlds, powers and practices. Differentiation in African states is an important issue, and much of postcolonial history may be read as one or other kind of attempt to come to terms with

⁵ Nelson Mandela, “Renewal and Renaissance—Towards a New World Order,” lecture given at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, U.K., 11 July 1997.

⁶ The Coptic Church in Egypt, for example, and was in existence by the second century of the Christian era. See Partrick, Theodore Hall, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: a history of the Coptic Orthodox Church*, Greensboro, NC: Fisher Park Press, 1996; Iris Habib el Masri, *The Story of the Copts: the true story of Christianity in Egypt* (2 volumes), Kenya: Coptic Bishopric for African Affairs, 1987.

⁷ For an argument on why civil society is an important construct despite its history; see Cochrane, “Religion and Civil Society: Readings from the South African Case,” in James R. Cochrane & Bastienne Klein (eds), *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society*, Washington D.C.: Center for Philosophy and Values, 2000, 15-53.

⁸ See the analysis of this heritage, including its impact on comparative religious studies, by David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.

⁹ See Adam Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

this in the kind of large-scale societies that the nation-state represents. This presses us to clarify the idea of civil society.

The colonial “scramble for Africa” coincides with the formal separation, most notably in France and the United States of America, of bourgeois society into three domains of authority: Political, economic and civic—a tripartite conception of society. Yet colonial constructs in Africa distort this construction of social authority and power. As Mamdani shows in *Citizen and Subject*,¹⁰ late colonial practices of direct and indirect rule left a legacy of bifurcated societies, with massive historical consequences. Urban areas, conceived as directly under the control of metropolises or their agents, were regulated through modern notions of civil society and citizenship (differentially accorded to colonizers and indigenous people). Rural areas generally were governed by indirect rule—called “association” by the French—through secondary agents, particularly local tribal authorities, who acted on behalf of the colonial power

These tribal authorities were always constructs in part. In ruling indirectly, colonial authorities drew selectively on traditional foundations of political life, while simultaneously altering their meaning. Tribal authorities became agents of colonial authority under a different structure of law and practice (“customary law”). Here local people were governed as subjects without the rights of the citizens of urban areas. Urban areas became racialized, and in rural areas native authorities were tribalized.¹¹ This history affects transformation strategies now and shapes a bitter dispute between “modernists” and “Africanists.” Modernists, Mamdani argues, seek a political solution to Africa’s problems through the development of a vigorous civil society in which individual rights are protected; Africanists place communitarian politics at the center where culture is defended. Mamdani believes that both civil society and communitarian life must be sublimated under a critique of each; thus democratization, still a vital and burning project, will entail “the deracialization of civil power and the detribalization of customary power....”¹² One needs to appreciate both the civil and the customary, but be able to “disentangle authoritarian from emancipatory possibilities in both.”¹³

The task of disentangling must be done, I suspect, in the light of the warnings from Gadamer against the destruction of tradition and its positive valuing of authority. This leads us directly to consider the matter of religion.

Civil Society and Religion in Africa

The relationship between religion and society in Africa is as complex as anywhere. In South Africa it takes the form of a rich mix of religious traditions (African, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish in particular), alongside strong secular or non-religious traditions (notably liberal humanism and revisionist Marxism). Inevitably these traditions sit within the contradictions of economy and politics common in Africa, particularly in the articulation of different modes of production and social organization some call modern and traditional, and the patterns of direct and indirect colonial rule to which I have already referred.

This dichotomy between two paradigms—previously noted in Mamdani’s distinction between rights-oriented modernists and communitarian Africanists—enters into the way in which religion is analyzed as well. Thus the dominant dialectic in contemporary discourse on Christianity in Africa lies between those who champion inculturation versus those who promote liberation

¹⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers/Cape Town: David Philip, 1996.

¹¹ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 18-19.

¹² Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 25.

¹³ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 299.

as the hermeneutic keys to the theological task. Despite attempts to unify these poles—some more successful than others¹⁴—the dichotomy remains significant, perhaps inevitably. It reveals different visions about what the problem is and how to address it. Mamdani's analysis, by implication, challenges the most central terms of reference of both approaches.

In approaches of liberation theologians, the modernist foundations of concepts of autonomy, rights, will, power, and history (usually theorized in terms of some grand narrative) tend to make it difficult to appreciate local, particularized patterns of culture which are not overtly or consciously political. In South Africa, this lacuna is seen most obviously in a widespread inability to find an adequate relationship to the most populous and most popular forms of religion: the Zionist and Zionist-Pentecostal churches. If, however, these are the churches of the poor, the communal centres of participation which give meaning and organizational substance to struggles for survival or for carving out a protected site of existence, then the contradiction becomes almost fatal to liberation theology movements.

In contrast, inculturation approaches, as I read them, emphasize concepts of community, duty, authority, obligation, and spirituality. This tends to accent the local, particularized patterns of culture and tradition in ways which make it difficult to theorize, let alone contest, the structural, systemic and developmental dynamics of a political economy. This makes it difficult to deal with popular, African initiated forms of religion (including the African initiated Christian churches), partly because of the apparent lack of any obvious relationship on the part of AIC's to the concerns of the public sphere (other, perhaps, than those that have do with cultural polity or morality).

Such contradictions within Christianity suggest that the prospects of a significant contribution on the part of Christian churches, taken as a whole, to the reconstruction of civil society in Africa are not good. Other contradictions also enter in: Denominationalism, historic alienations between mission churches and African initiated churches, substantial differences in understandings of the meaning of the gospel. The picture is probably variable, to the extent that the contestations and contradictions within Christianity itself inhibit the chances of a strong engagement and contribution in the public sphere, and thus their role in the development of a civil society.

Clearly, some church leaders in many parts of Africa are taking a direct interest in the public sphere, particularly in regard to the protection of important elements of civil society. Such advocacy at the level of public leadership has always been vital, even if not always present, as we have seen in South Africa. But we also know that advocacy at the level of "the diplomatic" does not necessarily translate either into the growth of civil society or into the rooting of public life concerns and practices among ordinary people who make up local Christian or other religious communities. Thus we must revisit, it seems, the importance of locally rooted movements. They hold a vital space open for the development of a civil society capable of affecting the directions that the steering media of money and power take in the economy and politics.¹⁵

One example of such movement, born of an ecological crisis, is found in southern Zimbabwe, among the followers of Mbuya Juliana.¹⁶ She claims to be a rainmaker, sent to lead her people back to traditional values. These values are, in fact, a mix of African traditional and Christian ideas. The occasion of her prophecy lay in a severe drought, which she blamed in part

¹⁴ See, for example, Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

¹⁵ The terms "steering media of money and power" come from the social theory of Jürgen Habermas.

¹⁶ See Hezekial Mafu, "The 1991-92 Zimbabwean Drought and Some Religious Reactions," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXV/3:288-308; see also Terence Ranger, "Religious Pluralism in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Britain-Zimbabwe Society Research Day, Oxford 1994," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXV/3:226-251.

on modernization processes in the region (e.g. the “cementing of holy places” to make dams). Her mission is the restoration of the land. Juliana’s movement challenged the powers of the state, business, church and indeed traditional authorities, and her success was key in helping restructure social relations on the land and land-use practice.¹⁷ Wilson and Ndhlovu note that the Juliana movement builds a new sense of community which may reintegrate the “disparate and conflictual social field within the villages, between the villages in the wider region, between the people and the government structures, and ultimately between people and the natural order.” They argue that “The continuing constraints on rural participation in ‘civil society’ will clearly require generations of innovators of the calibre of Ambuya Juliana.”¹⁸ Here is a prime example of a religious movement acting in civil society, drawing on traditional resources, and affecting both political and economic orders.

Constructing Civil Society Religiously, Tentatively

This example enables us to pay attention to two claims simultaneously. First, the construction of a strong and healthy civil society must include the institution of processes and mechanisms which allow popular, particular marginalized voices their proper place and dignity. Second, the injection of virtues and values by which a social consensus on the common good becomes possible must draw on the traditions with which people identify and which shape them. Let us consider these claims in relation to the role of Christian churches.

The contemporary idea of civil society points to the ineluctable shift in power under conditions of modernity, now global in their influence, from small centralized political authorities to large, mostly independent economic agencies with whom nation-states and international political bodies must come to terms.¹⁹ In this shift, the realm of citizen activity increases in complexity, and under democratic conditions, enters directly as a “third” partner into public life alongside economy and polity.

Thus, as a first step, our consideration of the role of Christian churches, or religion generally, drives us to assume a separation between the spheres of the civic, the economic and the political. In modern states, religious bodies usually (not always) find themselves out of the centres of power, having neither economic clout nor political muscle.²⁰ Civil society becomes—by a process of differentiation²¹—the prime sphere within which to consider the role and significance of religion. This does not imply a privatization of religion, though that may and does happen under certain conditions, leaving the spheres of political and economic activity outside of the realm of church or religious life.

A privatized religion, then, is not a *result* of the development of civil society under modern conditions, but an *abdication* of a role (by religion or theology) in civil society. It leaves concerns for the material and relational well-being of citizens to other interests and forces than those motivated by the transcendentals of truth, goodness and beauty, or holiness, justice and love.²² In

¹⁷ Ranger, “Religious Pluralism in Zimbabwe,” 239. One example of the restructuring of social relations is the imposition by Mbuya Juliana of price constraints on local stores.

¹⁸ Quoted by Ranger, “Religious Pluralism in Zimbabwe,” 241.

¹⁹ Jean L. Cohen & Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

²⁰ The examples of Poland, of Israel and of Egypt, to name three disparate locations, suggest that religious bodies continue to have some substantial direct influence on politics, though perhaps less so on economics.

²¹ See José Casanova, who argues that the secularization thesis can be sustained as “the differentiation and emancipation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms” but not as the loss or disappearance of religion: *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 6.

love.²² In Christian terms, this would be an abdication of the gospel itself.

Interestingly, politicians sensitive to the issues are not unaware of this “spiritual” dimension to political and economic life.²³ They know that social and economic transformation cannot succeed without spiritual foundations. Crime, corruption, graft, a culture of egoism and individual entitlement, violence against women and children, and the like are fundamental threats to the construction of a just and whole society; and they cannot be countered by political or economic policies alone or in the first instance. Indeed, political and economic realities may indeed be a major threat to society in this respect, strengthening the need for a strong civil society, and calling forth a prophetic religious voice.

Civil society, at least in principle, acts as a counter to the domination of the institutions of state and economy over others, a dominance usually secured through the exercise of substantial financial, legal, organizational and human resources. It is necessarily in the interests of churches (and other religious bodies) to enter into civil society for this reason alone, primarily on theological reasons but also in defence of religious freedom.

If religious institutions and personalities have a critical role to play in civil society, how are they to fulfil it? The question must be posed in the knowledge that religious institutions may well enter into public life by obstructing the development of civil society rather than encouraging it. The very contradictions contained in their own specific heritage, we have noted, often function to inhibit a constructive role in the public sphere. The link of the idea of civil society to a particular mode of production, a Cartesian epistemology and an anthropology that emphasizes autonomy and individuality, also stands in contradiction to specifically religious claims for authority or sovereignty.

Let us then conceive of religion in civil society such that religious discourse and practice becomes integral to public life. Cohen and Arato help us here (though, astonishingly, they pay no direct attention to religion in civil society in over seven hundred pages of text).²⁴ They conceive of civil society as a realm of communicative action based on mutually achieved agreements about norms and goals, sufficient—even if minimal—for some action to become possible. Such agreements may be limited, based on a single issue around which a particular coalition or cooperative action becomes possible, or deeper and more durable.

This normative approach to civil society stands against the destructive tendencies of administrative bureaucratization and market economic mechanisms, both rooted in instrumental rationalities. It grounds a politics of social solidarity and social justice. Civil society, in this view, is centrally about “patterns of normative integration and open-ended communication” that may confront and challenge the strategic and instrumental criteria of bureaucracies and markets.²⁵ It is embodied through the institutionalization of the necessary patterns in “structures of socialization, association and organized forms of communication of the lifeworld.”²⁶

The link between lifeworlds and civil society, and the emphasis on the institutionalization of lifeworld claims in civil society, points to the place religion may occupy—indeed, does oc-

²² For a recent analysis of theological aesthetics along these lines, drawing on the South African context among others, see John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

²³ See, for example, Thabo Mbeki, “From Liberation to Transformation,” Address to the World Conference on Religion and Peace Consultation, in *Spiritual Power for Nation-Building*, Report on Seminar, Goethe Institute, Johannesburg, 14-16 June 1997, pp. 11-16.

²⁴ Other than a reference to Gramsci and Roman Catholicism in the index, religion does not feature; nor are there references to a possible analogue of religion, namely “tradition,” either.

²⁵ Cohen & Arato, *Civil Society*, ix.

²⁶ Cohen & Arato, *Civil Society*, x.

cupy in many societies. A religious worldview and tradition often enters directly into the practical negotiation of relationships in civil society, and in economic and political life, and it may engender values and virtues which are essential to civic life. Religious or faith communities thus remain potentially vital in offering resources for the patterns of normative integration and open-ended communication that Cohen and Arato see as necessary foundations of civil society. Equally, they may well damage the emergence of a strong, healthy civil society by insisting on exclusive control over particular norms, by refusing to take into account the other norms, or by aggressively attacking or denying norms. There is clearly a residual ambiguity here that we must also take into account.

The introduction of norms derived from religious traditions into the public sphere must be solidly rooted in particular traditions if they are to have a chance of being materially grounded among citizens who identify with them, in the process of constructing more general civic virtues and values. So we might say then that religious communities best serve a strong and healthy civil society, in its necessary differentiation, if they enter into it with a “strong sense” of their own tradition and its claims as they see it. This is the significance of public theology.

From the point of view of Christian theology—particularly those forms that take seriously the preferential option for the poor—another dimension enters the picture: The needs and contributions of those marginalized by political and economic society or by dominant cultures or structures of knowledge must be foregrounded at least as much as any other. Seen from a political point of view, these knowledges contain a store of local, appropriate practical experience and wisdom necessary to a well-rooted civil society. Further, they have important inputs to make into political and economic policy, not in terms of generalized theory or analysis but in terms of the actual constraints and possibilities which confront policy makers on the ground.²⁷

To cite that champion of civil society, Vaclav Havel, as summarized by Jean Elshtain,²⁸ “one must begin from the bottom, from the humbly respected boundaries of the natural world, rather than from behind a veil of ignorance where one enacts a project of justice as a noumenal moment.” As Elshtain puts it, this approach to public life demystifies and diversifies our sense of reality, requiring us “to look at the messy, complex realities of *this* situation, here and now, as that which requires our attention and calls forth our very best and clearest attempts at thick description laden with moral notions.” The parallel with theologies of those who are not in centres of power and knowledge is obvious.

A “thick description” of moral life in the public sphere depends not on a kind of rationality abstracted from the particular, but on bonds of affection, on 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 and “the connection of small events to wider streams of life and thought.”²⁹ For Elshtain, such a theory is the necessary foundation of political life. In my view, this allows us to re-conceive the importance of the everyday life of religious communities for the

²⁷ Mbuya Juliana’s movement is a test case of this claim. But the claim can be more generally substantiated, and in one form or another it lies behind current “fourth generation” development theories (see David C. Korten, *Getting to the 21st century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*, West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1990) and alternative economic theories (for an important theologically linked approach, see Klaus Nürnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution: Managing the Approaching Crisis*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications/London: Zed Books, 1999).

²⁸ Jean Elshtain, “Political Theory and Moral Responsibility,” in Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates (eds), *Schools of Thought: Twenty Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001, 315-329.

²⁹ Elshtain, *op. cit.*, p. 54. “Narratives of closure” are for Elshtain 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. They bear some relation to the “grand narratives” which postmodernists attack, though Elshtain sees herself as a “moral realist” rather than as post-modern.

polis, captured in the narratives of ordinary people. This remains true even if we concede that narratives may be hidden, secluded, or silenced by others. Even when such narratives enter into the public transcript,³⁰ they often do so in coded ways, as may be seen among African initiated churches, the “churches of the people”, whose narratives have often been formally absent from the public sphere but present in other ways in civil society.³¹

How then does space become available for excluded, suppressed, hidden or diminished narratives to enter into the construction of a fully differentiated, healthy civil society? How is the traditional Catholic principle of subsidiarity to be given flesh—the proposition that governance should maximize the healthy participation and the exercise of freedom in civil society of particular groups in accordance with their level of specific, inherent competencies?³² John Coleman notes that religious communities empower civil society by “training ordinary, even poor people in transferable leadership skills ...: skills of speaking, convoking a meeting, gathering a people together, pursuing public discussions about issues of concern and moment in their society,” as well as “by outreach through popular organizations” which enables people to learn how they might “have a voice in the decisions about their life in their neighbourhoods and places of work.”³³

The same phenomenon is visible in the extraordinarily significant presence of clerics or lay church people with a strong Christian activist record in all sectors and levels of the new South African government.³⁴ Such people, in turn, are important fulcrums of activity within political and economic society around which organizations of civil society may generate knowledge, experience and influence. They are what Cohen and Arato call “sensors” who organically connect civil society in “ordinary, everyday life” to the institutions of political and economic life and open them to the processes of civil society.³⁵ They are also often the much needed people who may act as allies or in sympathy with church leaders and assemblies when they address government and business, thus strengthening civil society indirectly in its interaction with matters of polity and economy.

Despite all these possibilities, the insertion of religion into civil society remains unstable. First, many religious institutions are unclear about their role in the public sphere, or abrogate any such role. Second, they are often marginalized within their own public contexts, both ecclesially in the *ecumène* and socially in the *polis*. Third, civil society—because it requires normative integration and open-ended communication and because it tends to ground this in non-religious or

³⁰ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.

³¹ The most visible public movement in the first two decades of this century was the Ethiopian Movement, influenced by the AME (cf. Joseph T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, New York: OUP, 1995). Other less visible movements may have great local and regional impact beyond their religious activity; see particularly James Kiernan “The Healing Community and the Future of the Urban Working Class,” in “The Contribution of South Africa’s Religions to the Coming South Africa,” Conference proceedings, Department of Religious Studies, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 1993; Robin Petersen, “Time, Resistance and Reconstruction: Rethinking Kairos Theology in South Africa,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1995; and Glenda Kruss, *Religion, Class and Culture: Indigenous Churches in South Africa, with special reference to Zionist-Apostolics*, unpublished MA dissertation, 1985.

³² See George F. McLean, “Philosophy and Civil Society: Its Nature, its Past and its Future,” in George F. McLean (ed), *Civil Society and Social Reconstruction*, Washington D.C: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1997:16, 21-22; subsidiarity in pluralist societies means “not deadening the initiative of other groups by holding power to oneself, but enlivening and empowering the multiple communities to direct or govern their own life or area of activity and to train people ... to live and exercise responsibility in their own sphere of community life.”

³³ John A. Coleman, “Civil Society, Citizenship and Religion,” draft chapter 3, p. 6, forthcoming.

³⁴ The list includes members of cabinet, senior party leadership who function as national or regional MP’s, provincial premiers, top administrators in government institutions, key members of new constitutional bodies such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or the Human Rights Commission, and the like.

³⁵ Sensors are elite allies in state and economic systems who are supportive of programmes of democratization or cultural revision initiated by social movements or institutions within civil society; cf. Cohen & Arato, *Civil Society*, 471-2 *inter alia*.

non-traditional language—tends systematically to undercut precisely the particular religious and philosophical visions upon which it depends.³⁶ Fourth, civil society contains its own negativities and deformations; it can degenerate into a mess of private interests and factions, “[evacuating] the larger social world of any sense of truly public or common goods.”³⁷ Fifth, civil society itself is threatened by the imperatives of politics (power) and economy (money), or (as in parts of Africa) by the assertion of traditional patterns of authority and identity against the plurality it defines.

We are faced, therefore, with a situation where civil society remains fragile, in which religious communities may well fail to play the role for which they are, in some respects, well-equipped. Yet that does not diminish the importance either of civil society or the potential of religious communities as part of civil society. In Africa it is a truism to say that people are strongly religious, and the demographic reach of religious communities exceeds that of any other institutional form of life barring perhaps the state. Couple this with a view on civil society which emphasizes a multiplicity of voices as essential to the health of the body politic, add to it a religious/theological conviction which has roots in social experience of the importance of making space for the voices of those who are silenced or marginalized, mix it with the view that civil society is the bed-rock upon which a social morality must be constructed under modern conditions, and the task becomes immediately obvious.

To some extent there is a serendipitous element to the construction of generalizable values and virtues in civil life, an eschatological reserve in the making of the common good. Nevertheless, we are not consigned to fate nor 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.”³⁸ In this sense, the engagement of religious communities in public life, as a project of ethical formation, begins and ends in an act of faith.

Theology Once More

Let us turn again to the question of religion with which we began. Among those who have recently considered this question is Jacques Derrida.³⁹ He gives me my lead. Religion is a word, *religio*, of Graeco-Latin origin; from a particular culture, history, world-view; not a universal thing; carrying connections, assumptions, a way of seeing and of judging—and of not seeing and of *prejudging*. A word which transports a culture, a history which dominates others, or hides its domination, or refuses to look it in the face. A word which totalizes, absolutizes or, as Derrida puts it in linguistic irony, “Globalatinizes.” Could we not say much the same sort of thing about *theologia/theology*?

We have *this* word “theology,” thus *this* complex of ideas, histories, logics and illogics—in Africa. Penetrated by Greece and Rome in the north, probed and dissected by the heirs of Graeco-Roman culture in later colonial ventures, Africa is also deeply touched by Islam and the

³⁶ This point is strongly made by Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*; Seligman’s point is developed in relation to faith communities by Lewis S. Mudge, “Traditioned Communities and the Good Society: The Search for a Public Philosophy,” Address to the Center for Hermeneutical Studies, USA, April 1993.

³⁷ Coleman, “Civil Society, Citizenship and Religion,” 21.

³⁸ Cohen & Arato, *Civil Society*, 23.

³⁹ Derrida & Vattimo, *Religion*, 1998.

Semitic world—hybrid, mixed, heterogeneous; changed and changing, over the *longue durée*. Yet still Africa, not Greece, Rome, Arabia, Europe or North America.

What does it mean to do this Greek thing, to engage in the *logos* of the *theos* in Africa? Does it mean *one* thing? *Can* it mean one thing? Does it mean *anything*? It clearly does mean something, at least for some people, sometimes, in some places. But perhaps it changes even for them at other times, in other places.

What do we mean when we speak of “African theology”? African *Christian* theology, or not? Or should we think of theologies in the plural; or simply, of ways of reflecting on faith, or is it culture, or both faith and culture, or neither? Are these questions not potent enough to drive us away from thinking, believing, having faith in ... the idea, the claim, the presumption, that *one* kind of *theologia* is sufficient, or likely, or even possible. Is pluralism our necessary theological condition, a condition of the health of theology?

What about orthodoxy—another Greek word, imposing sameness on us, setting us against difference, thrusting “right teaching” upon us, without which we would be “wrong,” in need of detection, correction and perhaps expulsion. Orthodoxies do not stand up well under the set of questions I have elaborated. They often suppose one theology, one belief, one truth, one path, one way through; hence unable to deal with the idea that there might be “no way through”—an *aporia*, an impassable path, an unknowable knowledge, a bridge that cannot be crossed—at the heart of theology itself.

If orthodoxies, of whatever kind, cannot deal with the *idea* of the *aporia*, or the many *aporiai*,⁴⁰ at the heart of theology (one would have to be able to show that), then they cope even less well with the *practices* of those who have other ways of believing and thinking, or no particular way at all. Such people from the point of view of orthodoxy must be stopped, silenced, converted, saved, and once saved, if still sinning against the one theology, thrust away. Such people are treated as *fundamentally* misguided.

The word “fundamental” is intentional. Fundamentalisms are not merely the territory of conservative evangelical literalists. The geography of all expressions of faith that claim the one thing as the only thing, the only right thing, maps fundamentalisms into the roots of doctrine, dogma and decree. These may be hidden fundamentalisms perhaps, sophisticated ones certainly, but they are there.

They work against “what is to come,” in order to protect “what is” from what is to come. Why? Because *what is still to come* is unknown, uncontrollable. It escapes all authority except the authority of faith, to which none but the faithful themselves can testify, if they can testify at all, if they are allowed to testify at all, if their testimony can be couched in an acceptable language at all.

If that is true, if what is to come is decisive and cannot be controlled—and I believe it is so—then theology, in as much as it looks to what is to come, is a risky business. It has no business in determining, possessing, the truth, for it cannot and does not possess the truth. Here Karl Barth was right at least in his *Römerbrief*, that theology is a parable of the truth, if there is a truth.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For a profound discussion of six *aporiai* central to the Christian tradition, all of them compromised as often or not in western theology at least over the last many centuries, see Douglas R. McGaughey, *Strangers and Pilgrims: On the Role of Aporiai in Theology*, NY & Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997.

⁴¹ McGaughey, in his *Strangers and Pilgrims*, speaks in what I take to be a similar fashion about the crucial role of “possibility” as the driving force of theology, in relation to “actuality.” Possibility always breaks open actuality, revealing what is new, at the same time concealing something else. This dialectic of revealing and concealing, at the heart of the theology, also prevents any certainties about our claims, forces upon us the need for a critical appraisal of both actuality and possibility, both in theory and in practice.

A parable is slippery, a narrative which leaves much open, concealing as much as it reveals. It prevents us closing truth down. Its metaphorical tension persists against closure, opening up imagination, pressing open new truth.⁴² It marks the boundary to truth claims, forbidding us to cross that boundary lightly, lest we name the truth. For if we name the truth as ours, we own it, we thereby possess it—and thus lay claim to the status of God. Then theology is a demon to be exorcised.

Not to possess the truth is to be forced to search for it, unceasingly. Not to possess the truth is to be forced to think, and to act differently, hence to take responsibility for our actions, which means to take responsibility for the other. And if Ricoeur is right, then acting is always accompanied by suffering.⁴³

Why? Because acting, as human, is the power to actualize ourselves; to actualize ourselves also always means embodying the other in ourselves, recognizing ourselves as another, in the other. Acting is the actualization of our humanity. But our power to actualize ourselves is always curtailed, limited, constrained, perhaps diminished, even crushed, in a myriad ways, some more devastating than others. This diminishes us, and the other. Being prevented from actualizing ourselves, concretely, in our material and spiritual being in the world, is suffering. Ask a poor person, an unemployed person.

To take responsibility, then, is to take responsibility for acting and for suffering. It is the root of relationality, of life together, and thus of justice. This somewhat lengthy train of thought has a surprising conclusion, therefore, in the end. Let me state it bluntly. *Not to possess* the truth, as I have exegeted it, but to keep the truth open, is *also* to act justly. It is not that the one thing follows from the other; they are the same thing.

Think of the opposite statement implied by this, and you will see the challenge for theology in South Africa today. The opposite statement, the complement to what I have claimed, would be this: To possess the truth, to close it down, is to act unjustly. It is a tyranny. It diminishes the actualization of human being. It causes suffering, or excuses suffering. It works against the truly other and tries to force them to be the same. To confront that statement would indeed be a challenge for theology!

Is it a naïve challenge, a mere intellectual game I am playing, a play on words, just words? No. It may be applied directly to the key practical challenges that face us in the society we are trying to construct, one in which exclusivity is *not* the mark of our life together, where separation from the other is *not* the defining character of our citizenship, where difference is *not* an excuse for domination, and where sameness is *not* achieved at the cost of the subjugation of the other.

A brief autobiographical comment will allow me to sum up. At an early stage, I was faced by the deep negative impact of our social system on people. Directly and indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, my implicit, sometimes explicit subject was Apartheid and all its synonyms—a racially defined political economy of oppression and subjugation, with a correlative set of religious and other legitimizing ideologies.

In my consciousness, it began with what was a still naïve and early question on my part: If the summary of the laws, the commandments and the prophets is contained in the aphorism, love God and your neighbour as yourself (Matt. 22:36-40), what did this mean for those around

⁴² Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978. When a metaphor no longer holds open the predicative tension (“this is that”, e.g. Luther’s “God is a mighty fortress”), then it turns into a cliché, a dead metaphor. Its capacity to open up imagination and new truth dies.

⁴³ For Ricoeur’s central statements about the basis of his philosophical ethics, see *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

me who were not white,⁴⁴ whom I saw as if in a distant mist, and who clearly did not share my privileges or have my opportunities? How far does love extend, and who is my neighbour? Among conservative evangelical Christian circles which contained me, the answer was poor: “Don’t get involved in politics.” Why this unexplained limitation of the scope of love, this artificial restriction of the meaning of “personal” to exclude the inter-personal, on a larger scale than face-to-face meetings, to exclude, that is, the larger spheres of our life together, including the *polis*? Why this deficient, even false, view of spiritual life in relation to the world we inhabit?

It has led me to conclude, above all, that anything that restricts, in the name of a humanly imposed authority, the question of oneself, of one’s claims, of one’s particularity, of one’s actions and patterns of behaviour, of one’s interpretation of the world, is bad theology. While such restrictions might serve some interests, especially those of the imposed authority, and while they might well have some value, such as the preservation of the wisdom of an enduring tradition, they must in principle be open. Authority and tradition must in practice be questionable and questioned, even at the most fundamental levels, else it degenerates all too easily into unfaith.

The aim of such questioning would not in the first place be a destruction of faith or a denial of the worth of reflections on faith by others through history. Rather, it would serve the *deconstruction*—not destruction—of claims and counter-claims, in order to *reconstruct* them again in a new time and place, for changed circumstances and demands. In that sense, one might say that the very method of theological reflection is eschatological in character—anticipating a complete vision of a whole and healed future while acknowledging a flawed and fragmented present.

Thus responsible theological reflection seeks to break open new possibilities amidst the limits of present actualities. It partakes of what is to come, refuses to possess the truth, supports the struggle of human beings to actualize themselves, takes its stand against suffering, and incorporates the other in just institutions and ways of living well together. It is not difficult to test our thought and our action against criteria. And they should help us grasp what the task is of religion, or practical faith, in civil society.

⁴⁴ Later this became also “those who are not male” in a patriarchal society.