

Faith Communities, NGOs & Government

First International Symposium Round Table Discussion

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[This was the first of two symposia designed as a round table discussion between various stakeholders from politics, religion, the academy and civil society generally. The theme was phrased as an open-ended question, and discussion ensued with a group of panelists leading it. The key elements of this discussion, as captured by a team of trackers, are reproduced in expanded form below. They are gathered under appropriate headings to reflect particular topics, rather than in the strict sequential order of the discussion itself. —Editor]

The concept of 'civil society'

Confusion about the term 'civil society' is common, it was noted. For example, some wonder whether churches and faith communities are part of civil society, and if so, how are we to understand their role in it? Is it simply a designation, or do they have some responsibility outside of their intrinsic reasons for being, for civil society? There is a danger in affirming an intellectual concept without the necessary practical work involved in making the concept real. Thus, the term 'civil society' becomes an empty one.

There is a deeper ambiguity regarding the place of 'religion' in civil society, namely, the reality of a plurality of 'religions,' of multiple religious voices. Plurality raises issues of identity and power which need to be continually recognised and worked with. In discussing this point, we must take into account the particularity of the South African context: Transition in South Africa produced a situation where that which had been hidden in the struggle has since become apparent, in particular, the reality of many disagreements and divisions about how faith communities should engage in public life. Old friends of the struggle years have become 'enemies' around new issues (such as the death penalty, perhaps; or abortion; or gay/lesbian rights). Groups who played a minimal role in the struggle and thus were not heard much, if at all, in public, now have as much voice as others. The widespread tendency in the face of pluralism has been to withdraw into parochial, sectarian, privatist positions.

What we are talking about, in short, is the contested nature of religion. Another example would be the way in which African Independent Churches (AIC) continue to be sidelined in our debates about religion in public life. There are challenges to this. /end p. 71/ For example, in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Faith Community Hearings¹ it was interesting to see that some of the AICs, which have been accused of being apolitical, came into that meeting simply to announce that they had kept alive a deep tradition that had sustained people at the local level in a way that organised churches could not do. They were not really interested in speaking about what they had or had not done in the struggle against apartheid, except to make clear that their very *modus operandi* had achieved something no other churches had achieved. This introduces the question of whether the contested nature of faith traditions is part of the problem we face in dealing with transition. If so how can it be overcome?

However, a plurality of religions is mirrored by the plurality of 'society.' We do not have one society, but many different societies. Society is a complex identity consisting of many cultures and traditions. How is religion related to the pluriform society of which it is a part? How can we determine the place of religion? There is a two fold danger that religion will either withdraw into its own pious spiritual life or become too identified with society in general. Either the religious communities are silenced because they feel too much loyalty to government. Or they become ghettoised.

Now, some would argue, we have a multi-society, rather than a single civil society. By way of example, it was suggested, there is no civil society in the USA that includes the ordinary lives of the Native American people. Therefore, so it was proposed, the concept 'civil society' must include voices that are traditionally 'structurally silenced.' Faith communities potentially have much to say about this, and therefore have a grave responsibility for civil society in this respect at least.

The debate around civil society assumes that all are working under democratic governments, yet clearly not all African countries, for example, are. This adds a deeper ambiguity to the civil society debate which is often lacking.

The relationship between religion and government

Let us turn to underlying assumptions in the relationship between religious communities and government. There is a danger in religious organisations becoming too associated with the state, when ‘prophets become politicians.’ There is a dichotomy involved in ‘being in the world but not of the world.’ This suggests not withdrawing from the world, but answering to a different authority. Society needs religious institutions who will stand aside from government and society in order to be able to critique it. It is impossible to have a democracy without religious people who are responsible to transcendent authority. The need always remains for critical distance within the relationship, to enable religious bodies to stand aside in order to be able to speak freely and to speak with courage without abstaining from taking part in the formation of the value system of society. Yet, clearly the issue of what is ‘transcendent’ always needs to be contested and contextualised.

Role of religion?

Is it possible to conceive of a multi-layered role(s) for religions? On one level, they could engage in dialogue around ethics, influencing government and other public institutions (finance, for example). On a second level, it would be important to engage in creating programmes of action, practical initiatives on all levels of society, particularly at grassroots level. And finally, it is vital to be conscious of how religious organisations function in the formation of individual people, and to be aware of the challenge of the transformation of the consciousness of people, helping them to understand their role in society. /end p. 72/

This latter point is most important. Only when the consciousness of people is transformed will they have a different way of engaging in the world. Of course, it raises the question as to why so many religious organisations lack the creativity and responsibility to do this consistently and in a way that bears practical fruit?

The role of religious organisations in creating and maintaining ‘values’ and ‘ethics’ is what we must stress, therefore. This is particularly the case in the growing awareness of the negative effects of globalisation. Globalisation, many feel, is a criminal economic system pervading the world, in the extent to which it systematically impoverishes many people (materially and spiritually) while simultaneously enriching a small number of elites. It is, some suggest, a crime against humanity at this point.²

The issue of moral authority must also be discussed. In this respect, it is disheartening that we are still failing to look at the deeper needs of the majority. Religious organisations used to be asylums; now seem to be so meaningless or irrelevant to the majority of people.

There is a concern over the ‘disappearance’ of traditional religion. This affects people on an identity level and consequently on an action level; people feel disempowered because they do not know who they are and where they come from.

This gives rise to an internal dilemma: The assumption is that religion has a role to play in the debate around creating humane ethics and values in society, yet there is the added tension that religious organisations internally are in need of liberation ethics (particularly with regard to gender questions, one may add). Equally, there is the reality that religious organisations seem to be content to remain withdrawn from the public sphere. For example, the experience of the Moral Summit pertains.³ There was some failure around religious leaders coming together to take up the issues addressed at that meeting, for the sake of the country. It is being picked up very slowly in religious communities, whereas the African National Congress (as a political body) is tackling it enthusiastically.

Religion has something to offer humanity as we enter the 21st century. Its principal asset is a moral authority which has to do with being a principal source of values, of ethics in society, as well as providing a critique of society. This asset must be used to serve humanity—especially to serve people directly. Here we must concern ourselves with the issue of accountability and moral authority which is easily spoken about, but which is notoriously difficult to engender. How do we cope with the overwhelming sense of dissolution, or apathy so prevalent among many leaders among the religious communities?

Recognition of co-operative relationships

In an increasingly difficult situation regarding funding, there is a need for organisations to create co-operative ventures rather than continually being caught in competing for scarce funding. /end p. 73/ Can NGO’s and faith communities merge to pursue a common goal, rather than wanting to own their own projects?

Of course, there is and will be a lack of funding for religious initiatives. The reality, notwithstanding the many funds that come from religious agencies abroad (who have in any case cut back funding to southern Africa dramatically) is that it is very difficult to get funding for ‘religious’ projects. If this is to change at all, it is important to urge community based organisations and churches to document the ways in which they were serving the common good, to demonstrate credibility in this regard.

Finally, we note an element of cynicism in relationship building between religious bodies and leaders on the one hand, and political and financial institutions on the other. For example, the issue of religious leaders called on by the World Bank for help and information is both encouraging, but it also easily produces cynicism. What are the motives behind the call? Is it out of desperation, wanting a 'quick fix,' or out of a real understanding of what is of value? /end p. 74/

1. See J. Cochrane, J. de Gruchy and S. Martin, eds, *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999).