

Polity, Probity and Piety: Religion in the Making of Public Policy

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Like a rigidly trained academic of the scholastic type, schooled in Cartesian logic and taught always to define terms before presenting an argument (on the strange assumption that this “scientific procedure” will guarantee the force and the correctness of the argument despite the multiple interpretative constraints and selectively determined interests behind any assumptions made or conclusions drawn), let me tell you why I chose the words “polity”, “probity” and “piety” to act as the figurehead to what follows. As with the sentence just completed, these words are a mouthful. They leave you guessing and they give me lots of space to say whatever I want.

Still, they do inscribe a field of sorts. If you have not yet read Thabo Mbeki’s budget speech (Mbeki 1997), in which he asserted in remarkably strong terms that human integrity and honesty were as important to any hopes of reconstruction and development in South Africa as any political or economic decisions made, then let me point to a formulation he used repeatedly in one way or another. Our situation now, he said, demonstrates that we have no binding vision, no coherent set of values, and precious little evidence of the necessary virtues on which to build a whole and healed society. Instead, corruption—not just financial fraud and embezzlement, but corruption “of the soul”, a religious metaphor of course—has gained the upper hand. In his view, this is first and foremost a spiritual challenge, a religious challenge if you like, and one which government—any government—cannot address adequately.

I think he is right. I am interested therefore in how a particular

form of governance (“polity”) we call democratic may relate to religious convictions which are devoutly held and expressed in practice (“piety”) so as to encourage human integrity and honesty in relation to each other in the public sphere (“probity”).

Let me say at the outset that what follows are a series of scattered thoughts and notes for the purposes of this debate, rather than a carefully worked out argument. I will try to lay them out as coherently as possible. However, in the first instance the fact is that I am not entirely sure of myself in making judgements about religion in public policy. This is because I am searching for adequate models and processes myself, and the search is still young. In this, in South Africa at least, I suspect I am not alone—and this in itself is a point to ponder.

Why have we so little in the way of resources, models and experiences upon which to build? In part, no doubt, because of the dominance of the apartheid issue in the minds and hearts of those who might have otherwise developed the appropriate skills and experiences. In part because those who have been most forcefully involved in the public sphere against apartheid have great difficulty moving out of “resistance mode.” And in part, I am sure, because the openness and plurality of the society we now work with leaves many floundering, unsure of their identity in the new context, lacking in clear strategic goals that meet this context, and suffering from the withdrawal of the financial resources so readily available to them in the fight against the previous dispensation.

But there are also deeper reasons. First, in so-called secular democracies, religion in relation to public policy is an under-theorised area, one to which policy makers and analysts have paid little attention. Equally, those with specific religious traditions to peddle most often tend to understand their role in terms of a lobbying function for their sectional interests and not much more. This reduces the issue to a one-dimensional, sectional activity.

Second, in South Africa the tradition to which I have been most attached, and for which I wrote and spoke over many years, is

suspect in the public sphere. Its ambiguous, indeed, seriously compromised history, and its special, privileged standing among colonial and post-colonial governments—not least during the apartheid years—force one to caution. In saying this I would like to record that these problems were partly theorized within the tradition itself, for example, in the rejection of neo-Christendom models of social engagement and public life; or a rejection of partisan theologies when these were defined as linked to a particular historical group. For these reasons, most of those with my history are deeply suspicious of attempts to form political parties on the basis of religious claims.

So there is much that we still have to learn about religion in the public sphere and its potential or problematic role in the making of public policy. To the questions already posed may be added the obvious riders concerning the nature of a plural democracy in which compromise is a *sine qua non* of political life, and for which the acceptance of an equal right to speak and be heard among those of differing or contested traditions is a condition of the necessary public dialogue without which democracy does not exist.

Not surprisingly, much talk of religion in the public place now locates itself in relation to the concept of civil society. That concept itself is both variously defined and contested. Nevertheless, in South Africa we have some sense of its significance in the term used during the nineteen eighties to describe movements such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) or later, the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). They were often referred to as “extra-parliamentary activity.” In short, organizations of all kinds and at all levels were set up, or revived, to give expression to civic action without depending upon the formal political institutions ostensibly there for that purpose. We may say the same in relation to economic institutions. In the present context, because of this heritage of organization at local level in multiple spheres and sectors of society, we continue to have a solid NGO or CBO tradition,¹ and a fairly powerful coalition of these bodies working at national level.²

If we take that experience as a model—and it included or includes many organizations based on religious foundations—then we end up with a perspective on civil society close to that of Cohen and Arato who wrote the “bible” on the subject, *Civil Society and Political Theory*. It is one in which the dominant institutions which formally govern the spheres of politics and economy, despite their massive resources (materially and humanly), cannot be adequately understood without reference to the myriad ways in which ordinary civic action relates to them.

This relationship is two-fold: civil society operates through independent institutions of its own (such as religious institutions, charities, trades unions, parent-teacher associations, and so on); but it does so also by engaging in political and economic society, that is, by entering into the territory driven by what Habermas called the steering media of money and power in order to defend other interests and make historical claims.

We should not fall into the voluntarist fallacy—that such activities will prove sufficient to create a world of justice and equality; but neither should we fall into the determinist fallacy—that ordinary people in association with each other play no significant role in determining particular outcomes of the struggle between steering media interests and lifeworld interests. The example in the 1980s of the UDF, the MDM or COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), to name three coalitional movements, though they must be placed within a broader historical conjunction of political and economic forces, should make the point clear.

My question would be: If then, why not now? And if civil society includes organizations specifically concerned with the defense of lifeworlds and the insertion of their claims into political and economic life, then it seems to me that the role of religious traditions must be theorized as a strong element of civil society in binding people at multiple levels through some relatively coherent vision of society and some pattern of values and virtues regarded as essential to society.

In fact, the role of religion in the public sphere, particularly in what is called civil society, has become something of an industry in recent times.³ In other parts of the world such as the USA, the renewed interest in the public place of religion is predicated in part on a recognition among policy makers that a lot of what they are supposed to implement—in fields such as health care, education, ecology, civic and family violence, and the like—is often being done at a local level by groups who have a religious motivation.⁴ The failure of implementation in much of what passes for public policy is the drive behind questions concerning how implementation may occur, and who best serves the process of implementation. Religion comes off rather better in this respect than it used to under the hegemony of secularist thinking.⁵

Along similar lines, in eastern Europe in particular, the collapse of old structures which sustained the relationship between state and society has provoked an intense interest in finding new foundations for constructing a civil society which is capable of addressing public needs while remaining sensitive to popular demands at the same time as resisting any new state control over public life in general.⁶ These foundations are understood primarily in terms of the necessary values and virtues which might undergird civil society, and in religion, it is felt, lies an important source of such values and virtues.

Thus, there is a growing body of commentators and analysts who are saying that religion may be critical to the building of a healthy civil society and a democratic body politic. It expresses deeply rooted and enduring lifeworlds which not only compete with system imperatives, but also shape the terms of their embodiment in many ways.

To give one example of the kind of direction in which one may pursue this thought, let me refer to an analysis of globalization processes by Geoff Mulgan from the Demos Think-Tank in the United Kingdom which acts as consultant to major European corporations, NGOs and governments. (Mulgan 1997) He lists nine characteris-

tics of the current global climate he and the Demos group regard as central, which we need not detail here. But then he adds a tenth, which argues that one of the key questions for democracies in Europe in the next period of time concerns the question of trust, upon which may rest most other social institutional arrangements—a trust about values and politics that has been brought into question at multiple levels. Trust is closely tied to a sense of honoured values and respect for the other. It will not be bought but must be won—not in war, but in respect for lifeworlds. In one way or another, much of what makes up these lifeworlds is religious in quality if not in name.

A further reason for the renewed interest in religion in many places lies in what is often perceived as the collapse of “traditional” values and virtues—among them values or virtues such as mutual assistance, voluntary help, civility towards the other, personal restraint against violence, honesty, civic service and independent civil action (as opposed to state-dependent entitlements). Jean Elshtain, for example, thus suggests that Vaclav Havel is correct in his famous argument for transformation that is driven by groups, associations and movements which prevent, to use a phrase from Habermas, the complete colonization of the lifeworld by the steering media of money and power.⁷ As much as one cannot discount economic forces and struggles for political power, so one cannot discount the importance of this third sector of civil society in the modern or postmodern context.

The repeated references direct and implied, to the theories of Habermas on the working of society is worth commenting on. There are of course many ways in which to critique and deconstruct his position, as there are of any competing position. But it is perhaps not coincidental that many religious theorists, at least among Christian theologians (and not only in the West), look towards some form of discourse ethics along the lines Habermas proposes in his vision of rational communicative competence.

Rational communicative competence here means being able to

give good reasons for one's arguments, while being ready to concede the arguments of the other where they are persuasive, in a climate where discourse rather than violence (the alternative) is understood as the key political practice. We should note that "good reasons" includes one's normative claims and judgements, and hence, where these are religious, it includes religious claims for a normative ethics.

Of course, the flip side is that no normative claim may a priori exclude the claims of the other—and this is a problem for religious engagements in public life when they are fundamentalist or essentialist in some exclusive sense. In fact, most of the problems of religious discourse in public life, and hence in the making of public policy, stem from just such a sense of eternally fixed normative claims.

In the Christian tradition at least, I would argue (and I am really too uninformed to speak of other traditions), there is again a solid tradition of theorization—usually called "apophatic theology"—which rejects any claims from within the tradition itself to possess truth in any fixed, certain, essentialist manner.⁸ This tradition would be most important for a revised theological theory of how one might engage in public discourse and the making of public policy without violating the kind of discourse ethics Habermas takes to be a *sine qua non* of democratic society.

At the same time, the apophatic tradition does not let go of normative claims—it puts them in context, and the context is one of the limits to and constraints upon human knowledge and capacities in the first place rather than the realities of plurality. A thoroughly postmodernist theology would fail at this point, and probably, my guess is, it would have very little to say to public life or the making of public policy that is not mere deconstruction. And mere deconstruction builds nothing.

In South Africa, the simple matter of demographics should also instruct us. Whatever our personal predilections, judgements and commitments in respect of religious traditions, I would find it diffi-

cult to accept that we can ignore, in public life as much as personal, the fact that such a massive majority of our population think and act with some reference to religious symbols, images, narratives, rituals and constructions of time and space.

It was commonplace during the eighties among activists, religious as much as any, that popular religion of the kind to which I now refer was in practice of no use to the struggle. It had little public significance other than negatively—as a stumbling block to rationally understood emancipatory analysis and praxis: the incorrectly designated “opium of the people.”

I think we have still not come to terms with what this might mean for the construction of civil society or the reconstruction of political and economic society. At least among a recent wave of development theorists, critical of the shortcomings of earlier approaches, the importance of religious world views in correctly interpreting, locating and sustaining development at local level has come into focus (along, I might add, with a much better appreciation of the significance of gendered constructions of power and authority at local level).⁹

All of this suggests that the role of religion in public life needs to be theorized afresh. Clearly, there is no return to a kind of Christendom mentality in which a particular religion reigns supreme—at least not in any thoroughly plural modern society which has anything like a liberal constitution.

At the same time, it seems to me a mistake to tackle public debate about public policies—whether in local government, provincial forums, the national assembly, or in commissions, policy instruments and organs of civil society—as if religious experience was de facto irrelevant.

Notes

- 1 Non-Governmental Organization; Community Based Organization.
 - 2 The South African NGO Coalition, currently setting up and holding a series
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- of hearings over several months across South Africa on poverty, among other things.
- 3 See for example, among others: (Everett 1997); (MacLean 1997); (Wuthnow 1996); (De Gruchy/Martin 1995); (Gedicks 1995); (Hauerwas 1994); (Milbank 1990).
 - 4 A great deal of work in practical initiatives on Christianity or religion in public policy making is being done by the Carter Center in Atlanta. See for example, (Gunderson 1997).
 - 5 The idea of “the secular society” has itself taken something of a beating in recent times too. In religious discourse in the USA, this is most apparent in an almost radical reversal of Harvey Cox’s thesis about the “secular city” in the early nineteen sixties, with Cox himself accepting that his view has proven inadequate.
 - 6 Vaclav Havel is widely regarded as the most eloquent spokesperson for the necessary ethos.
 - 7 Elstain draws frequently on Havel’s thinking. See for example, (Bethke Elstain 1990, 134—148) and (Bethke Elstain 1996).
 - 8 Cf. A very good recent study on the importance of the apophatic tradition, written in part from a feminist perspective, by (Walker 1997).
 - 9 A useful and very accessible discussion of the issue of gender in development may be found in Pearson (1992).

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