

# Religion and Civil Society in Asia

Manuel B. Dy, Jr., Ph.D.

*Department of Philosophy, Ateneo de Manila University*

*“To me the issue is not about being Acehnese or Indonesian. It is about humanity.”*

Sociologist Otto Syamsuddin Ishak of Banda Aceh, Indonesia

*“It is better to be separated. Who wants to die a silly death over religion?”*

Je Tomahu, a Christian woman vendor in Ambon, Indonesia

While preparing for this introductory talk, I was struck by these two statements above in a *Time* magazine article on the historic election in Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> To me, they reflect the problematic of religion and civil society in Asia today and perhaps in other regions of the world as well. As we come close to the new millennium and with increasingly rapid globalization of our world with its awareness of a common humanity, ironically we are faced with ethnic conflicts in many parts of our planet: Kosovo, Indonesia, Tibet, Ireland, Sudan. And many of these conflicts have religion as the main issue. It is also during the last few remaining years of this century that we saw the rise in popularity of civil society as a response to the global problems of poverty, peace, population, and pollution. What is the role of religion in civil society? In the Asian region where we have a plurality of world religions, how can religion foster the growth of civil societies? Must religion divide rather than unite people? And to us Christians, where does our spirituality fit in this arena? Is it indeed silly to die for religion?

It is not the intention of this introductory talk to provide the solutions to these problems. Rather, I shall attempt to clarify concepts based on my limited knowledge and experience of civil society and religion, hopefully to raise issues specific to our regions in Asia and engage in a meaningful dialogue in our Inter-Religio Conference.

## WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

It is not easy or advisable to define civil society. It is not easy because the concept of civil society is still evolving, and it is not advisable because then we would be caught up and limited by the past meanings of the concept. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, however, provide us with a working definition of civil society in the preface to their monumental comprehensive

work *Civil Society and Political Theory* “as a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication.”<sup>2</sup> This sphere or space is created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilization, institutionalized and generalized through laws, with both independent action and institutionalization necessary for its reproduction.<sup>3</sup>

Civil society is distinguished from political society and economic society in that civil society is not directly interested in the acquisition of power and production. It seeks rather to influence these two societies through the life of democratic associations and unconstrained discussions in the cultural public sphere.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean, however, that all social relations outside of the state/political society and economy are civil society. Only those relations that are consciously organized with an organized form of communication can be considered as civil society. Thus, “civil society refers to the structures of socialization, association, and organized form of communication of the lifeworld to the extent that these are institutionalized or are in the process of being institutionalized.”<sup>5</sup>

Cohen and Arato mention two characteristics of civil society that are not essential to political society and economic society, normative integration and open-ended communication.<sup>6</sup> A civil society is bonded by shared common values and the process of communication is democratic and unconstrained. Vis-à-vis the state and economic society, civil society has come to mean the “arena of popular organizations, social movement, voluntary organizations, citizen associations and forms of public communication.”<sup>7</sup>

The notion of civil society can be traced back philosophically to Aristotle’s idea of the central nature of the socio-political order as being a *koin nia politika*, a civil society.<sup>8</sup> Three elements can be detected in Aristotle’s notion: governance, communication or solidarity, and participation or subsidiarity of these communities within the whole.<sup>9</sup> The modern meaning of civil society, however, is derived from the Enlightenment thinkers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Locke, Montesquieu, Ferguson, Hume, Smith), architects of liberalism, and the emergence of the citizenry. Civil society came to refer to new forms of public associations to counteract the absolutism of the state and to protect the victims of the new market economy. Civil society was seen as the “regulator of social conflicts through the interaction of individual private interests.”<sup>10</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a development of the concept was introduced by two critics of Hegel’s reduction of civil society to the state. Talcott Parsons, a liberal, and Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist, differentiated civil society from the economy as well as the state.<sup>11</sup>

The contemporary revival of civil society which started in the 1970's can be attributed to many factors: democracy movements in Eastern Europe against socialist party states and in Latin America against military dictatorships; welfare state crisis and critique of social statism from the right in Germany, and dissident movements in France.<sup>12</sup> Nearer home, in China, the introduction and development of the market economy broke the basic structure of the Party and the masses, spurning neighborhood and village activities.<sup>13</sup> The end of the Cold War has not actually ended the habits of thinking and acting according to the two opposite ideologies, totalitarianism and individualism. It is hoped that civil society can be an alternative framework for social change.

In the Asia Pacific region, the rise of civil society varies from one country to another. For the most part, civil society has taken the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), peoples organizations (POS), and non-profit foundations. The rapid economic growth of the "Asian tigers" before the July 1997 crisis and the emergence of the middle class certainly helped in the rise of civil society. There was a need for civil society to respond to the negative effects of rapid economic development such as the inequitable distribution of wealth, environmental degradation, AIDS and other diseases, population crisis. Growing government decentralization brought difficulty for government agencies in meeting diverse cultural and social demands, demanding more popular participation and public spending. Many government leaders have given recognition to the role of NGOs in social reconstruction. Global movements such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) have given impetus to the growth of civil society in Asia.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years, there has been a distinct development of civil society in the Asia Pacific region. Many NGOs have formed national networks and made collaborative arrangements with other NGOs of other Asian countries. Global issues such as environmental preservation, rural poverty, drug addiction, and gender issues have enhanced this regional cooperation. Policy-oriented scholars and researches have formed networks to offer alternative government policies. The trend "reflects the growing recognition of the importance of non-economic factors at an advanced stage of economic inter-dependence."<sup>15</sup> It has been perceived that a regional community cannot simply be based on economic interdependence and state policies; some non-economic values and interests must be shared.<sup>16</sup> The trend has also been an expansion of the scope of activity of NGOs and POS from simply direct giving of aid, creating dependency, to developing livelihood projects and empowerment programs. Civil society in Asia has gone beyond mere advocacy action to participative and mobilizing activities, providing more autonomy to individuals and/or communities.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of autonomy of civil society may be central to the Asia Pacific region. There is a tendency of some governments to “turn to” the non-profit sector, “reinforcing a hierarchical relationships where NGOs are reduced to mere subsidiaries of government agencies.”<sup>18</sup> In some Asian countries, however, the attitude of governments towards NGOs is one of suspicion, as undermining government security.<sup>19</sup>

Other problems plaguing the civil society in Asia are insufficient funding and lack of professional staff. Many social workers experience “burn-out” and have to sacrifice family time to live out their commitment.

What then characterizes civil society today? Allow me to enumerate some crucial elements.

First, civil society is formed consciously and voluntarily. The present revival of civil society has focused more than ever on its *autonomous* character vis-à-vis the state/political society and the economic order. As a counter-agent to the totalitarian tendency of the state and the individualistic accumulation of wealth of the market economy, civil society in Asia today is self-conscious of its autonomy as the space between the state/political society and the economy.

Secondly, to the extent that the state/political society and the economy are organized, civil society acts with some degree of *institutionalization*. Society cannot be changed with each person acting individually.

Thirdly, civil society is a community of *shared values*. What binds a civil society and sustains its existence is a culture in the sense of common values. These shared values enable the members of a civil society to interact with each other with some level of intimacy in spite of the organized communication that comes with institutionalization. This is especially true of Asia where civil society is very much linked to culture.

Fourthly, civil society with its fund of shared values seeks for the *common good*. Explicit or implicit, it envisions a society to be constructed on sustainable values of justice, peace, democracy, environmental soundness, and gender equality. The members of civil society are imbued with a commitment to achieve the common good.

Fifth, the way to consciousness and attainment of this common good for civil society is *public discourse*, essential to *democracy* and the social space, which constitutes it. Discourse or dialogue, needless to say, is the alternative to violence. Meaningful dialogue rests on the equality and rationality of the participants engaged in the discourse. Civil society does not seek nor use force to achieve its goal. Rather, it seeks to expand public discourse to influence policies for the common good. Part of this expansion of public discourse is the interfacing mechanism civil society identifies and creates. The effectiveness of public discourse is the moral power of civil society.

“Through the public discourse and interfacing mechanisms, civil society engages the other three sectors (state, political society, and economic society) to implement its vision of what a society should be, based solely on the moral power emanating from it.”<sup>20</sup>

#### THE HUMAN PERSON IN CIVIL SOCIETY

From the above characteristics of civil society, we can envision the kind of person who enters into it and becomes an active member of it.

Negatively, civil society is not for the “stray dogs,” the downcast and the forsaken that we find in the streets and stations of our modern cities, victims of material progress at the expense of humanity.<sup>21</sup> The stray dogs are also the men and women who live day in and day out, “confined as they are to arid and joyless workplaces and homes.”<sup>22</sup> They forget and neglect what society is, except perhaps during election time. Nor is civil society for the humanoids, people who have lost touch of their feelings, prey to the technological addiction and advancement at all costs, behaving uniformly and predictably like their machines and gadgets. These people have neither time for their family nor room for genuine friendship. Nor is civil society for the narcissistic, people who have distanced themselves from their surroundings (persons and things) and from themselves because of their pursuit of material wealth and prestige, their sole objective in life. Narcissists manipulate interpersonal relations, discourage deep personal attachments, are incapable of loyalty and gratitude, and their personality is covered by shallow snippets of images influenced by the media and technology. Stray dogs, humanoids, narcissists, these are incapable of forming a society, much less a civil one.

Positively, allow me to attempt to give a phenomenological description of the human person in a civil society.

First, to the point that civil society is autonomous, the human person is free and responsible. Civil society is “about human beings free to express every major dimension of themselves, mental, but also physical; emotional and spiritual; individual but also social.”<sup>23</sup> There are, however, many levels and kinds of freedom. Philosophically, we can delineate three levels of freedom.<sup>24</sup> The first level is the freedom of choice, the absence of external restrictions in choosing goods. This is what every human being *has* by virtue of possessing a human nature. The second level is the freedom to do what one ought to do. Freedom is not simply the absence of tyranny or oppression nor a license to do what one likes but the condition to do the good. On the second level, freedom is oriented towards higher values and entails responsibility in the sense not merely of accountability, of being the source of one’s action, but of being able to respond to the call of value(s)

inherent in a situation. This entails the absence of internal restrictions, of egoism and whims, and being free-for. The third level is the freedom to build one's character. As one becomes more responsible, one *becomes* free, *being* free. This is freedom in the sense of self-determination and self-possession, which is formed paradoxically in the giving of self to the other in commitment and fidelity. The three levels build upon one another, the latter orienting and shaping the former, and the horizon moves from the external to the internal, from the individual to the social.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, the human person is aware of his being an embodied spirit. Human freedom is finite freedom, limited but open to possibilities by being incarnated. Human freedom is not empty and vacuous as Sartre would think but needs to be embodied in space and time, in language, arts and culture, in institutions, so meticulously described by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. The human persons participating in civil society are conscious of this reality, that they can only enhance freedom together by being institutionalized.

Thirdly, the human person is *ens amans* in Max Scheler's terminology, a being that loves, or in Heideggerian terms, a *Dasein*, a There-being whose basic structure is care. Love for Scheler is a movement of the heart towards higher values, and one characteristic of higher values is their indivisibility, their share-ability. Care for Heidegger is being-ahead-of-itself (future) while being-already-in-the-world (past) and being-alongside-entities-which-we-encounter (making present). Being human calls for being caring, uniting the past, present and future (what we now call as sustainable development), and this translates to solicitude when caring for persons. Civil society is built by people who love, who care, who are sensitive to the needs of others and are responsive to them. This caring varies over time and place, its ripple effects through larger gatherings from the family to the community to the nation. In this regard, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) "understood that civil society is not primarily bound together by social contract . . . On the contrary, to think in contractual terms is a decisive step in distancing people from one another, in encouraging them to think in terms of their rights rather than relations that bind them to their fellowmen and the attendant duties. As soon as people begin to think first of their rights, including rights, the seed of fragmentation is planted among them."<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to note that the emphasis on the interpersonal and obligations is characteristic of oriental thinkers like Confucius.

Fourthly, the human person stands in solidarity and dialogue with others. What makes persons kind, caring, loving? Herder sought the wellspring of socio-political life and found it in dialogue, in language. Language paradoxically unites as it divides, and vice versa. And yet it is only in solidarity and dialogue that the common good or the truth is

revealed. The human person in civil society realizes that it is only in union with others and communicating with them, respecting their otherness, that truth is arrived at and the common good achieved. Fr. Teilhard de Chardin S.J., whom I consider the forerunner and prophet of globalization, spoke of the union of love as differentiating and the differences uniting. For society to be civil and not violent, human persons have no other recourse but to engage in dialogue or discourse, united by a common concern for the truth, and arriving at a consensus.

#### THE NEED FOR RELIGION IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Given the vision of the human person as a member-participant of civil society, where is the place of religion in civil society? What does spirituality have to do with civil society?

Recently, during a colloquium-seminar for teachers in a Catholic university in the Visayas, one teacher asked me for the reason why community involvement projects and groups of the Ateneo de Manila, in particular the Jesuit Volunteer Program, have endured for so long. He was quick enough to answer his own question; the Ignatian spirituality of the volunteers has been the wellspring and energy for their commitment. Indeed, the NGO or PO worker needs some form of spiritual food to nourish and sustain him in the giving of himself to others.<sup>27</sup> A certain deep spirituality, explicit or implicit, traditional or liberal, is needed to sustain the worker against fanaticism, dogmatism, frustrations and “burn out”.<sup>28</sup> It is spirituality that inspires the courage and qualitative change of consciousness of social activists that lead to the miracle of action.<sup>29</sup>

But beyond the personal level, religion may be needed in civil society. In civil society, religion may have to go beyond the personal spirituality of the social worker, beyond the private relationship between the individual volunteer and God, to the communal kind of spirituality.

And when we shift to the communal kind of spirituality, are we not coming closer to one of the unique characteristics of oriental religions? Our own religion, Christianity, in the recent decades has revived the communal aspect of witnessing the faith.

Our reflections on civil society and the kind of person-participant in it have led me to the following “spaces” for religion in civil society:

First, religion brings completion to human liberty. Most, if not all, religions speak of emancipation from oppression, from evil, pain, suffering and death. To the three levels of freedom, we can add a fourth level that encompasses all three-spiritual freedom, which is total freedom. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “Freedom is the measure of man’s dignity and greatness. Living the freedom sought by individuals and peoples is a great

challenge to man's spiritual growth and to the moral vitality of nations... Freedom is ordered to the truth, and is fulfilled in man's quest for truth and in man's living in the truth."<sup>30</sup> And the truth shall set you free. Religion speaks of the language of hope, the hope of total emancipation and fullness of freedom.

Second, religion provides the rites and rituals for institutionalization of civil society. It is important not to underestimate the importance of rites and rituals in the institutionalization of civil society. "Through ritual, beliefs, values and human ordering are invested with the aura of the sacred, at least in the sense of asserting a foundation beyond ourselves for inalienable rights and common horizons."<sup>31</sup> Religious rite deepens the conviction of the human person-participants in civil society by embodying the source of authority in its institution. All religions, especially the oriental ones, are replete with rites and rituals.

Third, religion sets the way of life of loving and caring, and laying the ground for standard of ethical behavior. Religion, especially oriental religion, is a way of life, of living in harmony with nature and with others, through loving and caring for one another. Religion addresses the heart and speaks of the transcendent source and ultimate end of all values. Confronted with the challenge of ethical relativism in our complex modern society, civil society can appeal to the Golden Rule that is found in all religions expressed in different ways. Religion attests to the universality of values of peace, solidarity, justice and liberty. Civil society in its effort to build a civilization of love based on these universal values and in a culture of freedom needs religion as its impetus.

Finally, religion founds the unity and diversity of peoples and cultures. The fear of "difference" can lead to the denial of the humanity of "the other" leading to a cycle of violence, of genocide and ethnic cleansing. And yet, transcending otherness, there is a common humanity. We all belong to one family. Different cultures are different ways of facing the question of the meaning of existence. "And it is precisely here that we find one source of respect which is due to every culture and every nation: every culture is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular the human person: it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life. The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest of all mysteries: the mystery of God."<sup>32</sup> Civil society in its attempt to foster solidarity and discourse needs religion to point to the ineffable mystery of the truth of human existence. "The truth about man is the absolute standard by which all cultures are judged; but every culture has something to teach us about one or another dimension of that complex truth. Thus the 'difference' which some find as threatening can, through respectful dialogue, become the source of deeper understanding of the mystery of



human existence.”<sup>33</sup> Civil society, to paraphrase Pope John Paul II, can never ignore the transcendent, the spiritual dimension of human experience, without harming the cause of man and the cause of freedom.<sup>34</sup>

#### THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIANITY IN CIVIL SOCIETY

As we approach the new millennium, what then is the challenge of Christianity in civil society? I suggest three areas:

First, Christianity must promote freedom and the universal values of justice, peace and solidarity in civil society. Like the state, the Church as a civil society exists for others, and when it asks for freedom from the state and political society as well as the economic order, it asks for the condition necessary to carry out its mission.<sup>35</sup> “While the walls of division stand between religions, the Catholic Church asks for safeguards for *all* religions – and in effect, for a recognition of the institution of religion in the ordering of society. This recognition pertains to the value of religion as a response to the human need for transcendence.”<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, Christianity can enhance its movement of inculturation, especially in the performance of rites and rituals. This calls for creative adaptation to different cultures, speaking their language and learning their ways.

Thirdly, Christianity must be catholic. In the words of Simone Weil, “Christianity should contain all vocations without exception since it is catholic. In consequence the Church should also be catholic. Christianity is catholic by right, but not in fact. So many things are outside it, so many things I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence.”<sup>37</sup> Being catholic means being tolerant of other religions. Our Pope says, “Faith in Christ does not impel us to intolerance. On the contrary, it obliges us to engage others in respectful dialogue. Love of Christ does not distract us from interest in others, but rather invites us to responsibility for them, to the exclusion of no one and indeed, if anything, with a special concern for the weakest and the suffering.”<sup>38</sup> Tolerance here should not merely be a passive allowance for the difference in other religions but its celebration and promotion, inspired by empathy and love.<sup>39</sup> In inter-religious dialogue, Christianity must address not merely theological or cultural issues but political and socio-economic problems as well, such that the foundation of understanding can be established and the dialogue itself can be a process of empowerment in the pursuit of justice and equality.<sup>40</sup>

Let me conclude with the message of our Pope: “We must not be afraid of the future. We must not be afraid of man. It is no accident that we are here. Each and every human person has been created in the ‘image and

likeness' of the One who is the Origin of all that is. We have within us the capacities of wisdom and virtue. With these gifts, and with the help of God's grace, we can build in the next century and the next millennium a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom. We can and must do so! And in doing so, we shall see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit."<sup>41</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 *Time*, June 7, 1999, pp. 38, 39.
- 2 Jean L. Cohen & Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (MIT Press, 1994), p. ix.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. x.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. x.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 7 Jun Atienza, "An Alternative Framework for Social Change," *Intersect*, April-May 1994, p. 5.
- 8 For an evolution of the concept of civil society, cf. George F. McLean, "Philosophy and Civil Society: Its Nature, Its Past and Its Future," *Civil Society and Social Reconstruction*. Edited by George F. McLean (Washington D.C., The Council for Research on Values and Philosophy, 1997), pp. 77-81.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 10 Jun Atienza, *op.cit.*, p. 5.
- 11 Cohen and Arato, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
- 12 Jun Atienza, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 13 George F. McLean, *op. cit.*, p. vii.
- 14 Tadashi Yamamoto (ed.), *Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community* (The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 10-15.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. xi.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 20 Jun Atienza, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- 21 Richard Khuri, "Current Humanoids and the Return to Civil Society" in George F. McLean, *op. cit.*, pp. 289-294. I am indebted to this part to the mentioned article.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- 24 George F. Mclean, "The Aesthetic as the New Space for Civil Society," in Wang Miaoyang, Yu Xuanmeng & Manuel B. Dy (eds.), *Civil Society in a Chinese Context* (Washington D.C., Council for Research on Values and Philosophy, 1997), p. 29.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 26 Richard Khuri, *op. cit.*, p. 300.
- 27 Anna P. de Vera, "Living the Faith that Does Justice," *Intersect*, February 1999, pp. 7-9.
- 28 John J. Caroll, S.J., "Civil Society: An Idea Whose Time Has Come," *Intersect*, April-May 1994, p. 3.
- 29 Corazon Juliano Soliman, "Meeting with a Group of Dreamers," *Intersect*, April-May 1994, p. 19.

- 30 Pope John Paul II Address to the United Nations General Assembly, October 5, 1995, section 12.
- 31 David N. Power, "Rituals and Public Life: Their Role in the Process of Social Reconstruction," in George F. McLean, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
- 32 Pope John Paul II, *op. cit.*, section 9.
- 33 *Ibid.*, section 10.
- 34 *Ibid.*, section 16.
- 35 Florencio R. Riguera, "Civil Equality of Religion in Society," in George F. McLean, *op. cit.*, p. 390.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 390. Italics mine.
- 37 Simone Weil, *Spiritual Autobiography*, in George F. McLean, *op. cit.*, p. 308.
- 38 Pope John Paul II, *op. cit.*, section 17.
- 39 Manuel B. Dy, "Marcel's Phenomenology of Tolerance and Civil Society," in Wang Miaoyang, Yu Xuanmeng & Manuel B. Dy, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- 40 Carmen Abubakar, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Making of Civil Society, A study of the Silsilah Movement," in Mirriam Coronel Ferrer (ed.), *Civil Society Making Civil Society* (Manila, Third World Studies Center, 1997), pp. 202-203.
- 41 Pope John Paul II, *op. cit.*, section 18.