

Faith Communities in a Civil Society – Christian Perspectives

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On September 11th, 1906, Mohandas Gandhi addressed a meeting of some 3,000 people in the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg to protest against the introduction of registration and fingerprinting for all Indians in South Africa – part of the first wave in the terrible history of legal racism in South Africa which ended at last in the final decade of the last century. It was a Muslim in the audience, Haji Habib, who first proposed that the decision for non-violent resistance to the legislation should be taken 'in the name of God'. Gandhi stressed the great solemnity of such a form of words, but the meeting rose to affirm this as their will. The satyagraha movement was born, the movement of 'soul force' whose central principle was that our behaviour must witness to truth whatever the cost – and that this witness to truth can never, of its very nature, involve violence or a response to oppression that simply mirrors what has been done by the oppressor. In Gandhi's vision, Christ's prohibition against retaliation came together with his own Hindu heritage to inspire a lifetime of absolutely consistent labour on behalf of this 'soul power'; and on that day in Johannesburg, as at many other points in his life, Gandhi was wholeheartedly supported by his Muslim allies.

The ironies don't need to be spelled out today. It is also the anniversary of an act of nightmare violence which has set in motion a further chain of retaliation, fear and misery. In 1906, the convergence of traditions and disciplines of faith signalled the possibility of escaping from the calculations of ordinary political struggle, the world in which we simply go on imitating the behaviour that has damaged us in the insane hope that we might somehow arrive at a point where someone has a sufficient monopoly of the power to generate fear to guarantee stability. A hundred and one years on, that system of political calculation seems stronger than ever in much of our world; and worse still, religious communities are regularly blamed for its persistence and power. If we ask whether the coming together of religious groups works today as a sign of hope, the response from a good part of the educated public is not very encouraging. Part of our agenda, then, both in the working of the Christian-Muslim Forum and in the discussions of this meeting, has to be to recover that sense of a convergent belief in the possibility of liberation from the systems of violent struggle, in a way that genuinely opens doors in our world.

Gandhi's own conversion to a consistent philosophy of non-violence was, he tells us in *My Experiments with Truth* (p.195), greatly assisted by an insight that brought together legal training with his study of the Gita: 'I understood the Gita teaching of non-possession to mean that those who desired salvation should act like the trustee, who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own.' This offers a very useful way in to the question of what it is that makes or ought to make the perspective of religious faith liberatingly distinctive in human society – both in the sense Gandhi intended and in a much wider and more radical sense. Gandhi is reflecting on the emphasis in the Bhagavad-Gita on detachment: our natural or instinctive way of operating in the world is to imagine ourselves as controlling both our

own destiny and the conditions in which we live, so that we struggle for the conditions that promise us such control. But the divine imperative is that our actions should be determined not by this but by the fixed resolve to act in accordance with the truth – that is, with the truth of who and what he actually are both in society and in the universe itself. When we have learned to act in this way, we are free from fear; we give up the anxious effort to master our circumstances by force. Who we are and what we have come to us from God, and what they communicate to us of God's goodness can never be lost; so it is possible for us to see both who we are and what we have as given for the sake of others. Hence we are trustees: we own nothing absolutely, but are commissioned to communicate to others in spiritual and in directly practical ways the assurance that God has given us.

Gandhian satyagraha is thus rooted in an attitude which, in his eyes, should be fundamental to all religious practice and belief worth the name, an attitude that relativizes the claim of the self to absolute possession or absolute control. But it does not entail – as the superficial observer might think – absolute passivity or the acceptance of injustice; as Gandhi's witness so consistently shows, it is rather that it dictates the way in which we resist. We do not resist in such a way that we appear to be seeking the same kind of power as is now injuring or frustrating us. We do not imitate anything except the truth: our model is the divine communication of what is good. But beyond this obvious principle is the further point which Gandhi implies but does not fully state: belief itself is not a possession, something acquired by the ego that will henceforth satisfy the ego's needs for security and control. To believe in God is to be a 'trustee' of God's truth. My belief is not a thing I own; I might say, truthfully enough, that it 'owns' me, that I am at its service, not that it is at mine. When I claim truth for my religious convictions, it is not a claim that my opinion or belief is superior, but a confession that I have resolved to be unreservedly at the service of the reality that has changed my world and set me free from the enslavement of struggle and rivalry. To witness to this in the hope that others will share it is not an exercise in conquest, in signing up more adherents to my party, but simply the offer of a liberation and absolution that has been gratuitously offered to me. When Gandhi reminded his Johannesburg audience that a promise made in the name of God was a serious matter, he was underlining for them the fact that commitment to God in their work for justice involved them in an act of renunciation in the name of truth, the renunciation of any style of living and acting that simply reproduced the ordinary anxieties and exchanges of force that constitute the routine of human society.

Now not all of us are going to agree about how far the claims of Gandhi's legacy extend, how far he was able to see their full implications within his own Indian context or how they are to be implemented in our contemporary setting. But if we are asking about the place of religious commitment in modern civil society, it seems to me that these aspects of his vision of satyagraha are a very suggestive starting-point. What he is asserting is that the religious witness is at its most clearly distinctive in society when it most plainly declares itself answerable to an order quite beyond the balances and negotiations of social conflict and its containments; and when it thus renounces the claim to have a place among others in the social complex.

This is, I grant, a startling way of putting it; surely what any religious believer wants is

to have the voice of faith heard within the pluralist debate, to have a guaranteed place at the table? Surely that's why we are discussing the whole question of faith and civil society and why we want to answer once and for all the reproach that religion is a dangerous and destabilizing presence in our culture? Well, yes; but the point which Gandhi invites us to consider is that we shall persuade our culture about this only when religion ceases to appear as yet another human group hungry for security, privilege and the liberty to enforce its convictions. To have faith, Gandhi might say, is to hold something in trust for humanity – a vision of who and what humanity is in relation to a truth that does not depend on worldly victory. And to witness to a truth that does not depend on worldly victory – a truth that, in Plato's terms, is not just the interest of the strong or successful – implies that we do not battle for its survival or triumph in the way that interests and parties do in the world around us. In a paradox that never ceases to challenge and puzzle both believers and unbelievers, it is when we are free from the passion to be taken seriously, to be protected or indeed to be obeyed that we are most likely to be heard. The convincing witness to faith is one for whom safety and success are immaterial, and one for whom therefore the exercise of violent force against another of different conviction is ruled out. And the nature of an authentically religious community is made visible in its admission of dependence on God – which means both that it does not fight for position and power and that it will not see itself as existing just by the license of human society. It proclaims both its right to exist on the basis of the call of God and its refusal to enforce that right by the routine methods of human conflict.

All this is, for the Christian believer, rooted in the gospel narrative and in the reflections of the first Christians. Jesus himself in his trial before Pilate says that his royal authority does not derive from anything except the eternal truth which he himself embodies as the incarnate Word of God; only if his authority depended on some other source would his servants fight (Jn 18.36-7). Earthly authority needs to reinforce itself in conflict and dominance; if the community of Jesus' followers reinforced itself in such a way, it would be admitting that its claims were derived from this human order. The realm, the *basileia*, of God, to which Jesus' acts and words point is not a region within human society any more than it is a region within human geography; it is that condition of human relationships, public and private, where the purpose of God is determinative for men and women and so becomes visible in our history – a condition that can be partially realised in the life of the community around Jesus but waits for its full embodiment in a future only God knows. And for the first and second generations of believers, the community in which relation with the Risen Jesus transforms all relationships into the exchange of the gifts given by Jesus' Spirit has come to be seen as the historical foretaste of this future, as it is here and now the embodiment of Jesus' own identity – the Body of Christ – to the extent it shows this new quality of relation.

The Church is, in this perspective, the trustee of a vision that is radical and universal, the vision of a social order that is without fear, oppression, the violence of exclusion and the search for scapegoats because it is one where each recognizes their dependence on all and each is seen as having an irreplaceable gift for all. The Church cannot begin to claim that it consistently lives by this; its failure is all too visible, century by century. But its credibility does not hang on its unbroken success; only on

its continued willingness to be judged by what it announces and points to, the non-competitive, non-violent order of God's realm, centred upon Jesus and accessible through commitment to him. Within the volatile and plural context of a society that has no single frame of moral or religious reference, it makes two fundamental contributions to the common imagination and moral climate. The first is that it declares that, in virtue of everyone's primordial relation to God (made in God's image), the dignity of every person is non-negotiable: each has a unique gift to give, each is owed respect and patience and the freedom to contribute what is given them. This remains true whether we are speaking of a gravely disabled person - when we might be tempted to think they would be better off removed from human society, or of a suspected terrorist - when we might be tempted to think that torture could be justified in extracting information, or of numberless poor throughout the world - when we should be more comfortable if we were allowed to regard them as no more than collateral damage in the steady advance of prosperity for our 'developed' economies.

But the point of this first contribution, as it affects civil society, is this: the presence of the Church, not as a clamorous interest group but as a community confident of its rootedness in something beyond the merely political, expresses a vision of human dignity and mutual human obligation which, because of its indifference to popular success or official legitimation, poses to every other community a special sort of challenge. 'Civil society' is the recognized shorthand description for all those varieties of human association that rest on willing co-operation for the sake of social goods that belong to the whole group, not just to any individual or faction, and which are not created or wholly controlled by state authority. As such, their very existence presupposes persons who are able to take responsibility for themselves and to trust one another in this enterprise. The presence of the Christian community puts to civil society the question of where we look for the foundation of such confidence about responsibility and trustworthiness: does this set of assumptions about humanity rest on a fragile human agreement, on the decision of human beings to behave as if they were responsible, or on something deeper and less contingent, something to which any and every human society is finally answerable? Is the social creativity which civil society takes for granted part of a human 'birthright'?

The second major contribution made by the presence of the Church is what we might in shorthand call universalism - not in the technical theological sense, but simply meaning the conviction that every human agent is involved in either creating or frustrating a common good that relates to the whole human race. In plainer terms, we cannot as Christians settle down with the conclusion that what is lastingly and truly good for any one individual or group is completely different from what is lastingly and truly good for any other. Justice is not local in an exclusive sense or limited by circumstances; there are no classes or subgroups of humanity who are entitled to less of God's love; and so there are no classes entitled to lower levels of human respect or compassion or service. And since an important aspect of civil society is the assumption that human welfare is not achieved by utilitarian generalities imposed from above but requires active and particularized labour, the fact of the Christian community's presence once again puts the question of how human society holds together the need for action appropriate to specific and local conditions with the lively awareness of what is due to all people everywhere. This is not only about a vision of universal human

justice as we normally think of it, but also applies to how we act justly towards those who are not yet born – how we create a just understanding of our relation to the environment.

In short, the significance of the Church for civil society is in keeping alive a concern both to honour and to justify the absolute and non-negotiable character of the human vision of responsibility and justice that is at work in all human association for the common good. It is about connecting the life of civil society with its deepest roots, acknowledged or not. The conviction of being answerable to God for how we serve and respect God's human and non-human creation at the very least serves to ensure that the human search for shared welfare and responsible liberty will not be reduced to a matter of human consensus alone. And if the Church – or any other community of faith – asks of society the respect that will allow it to be itself, it does so not because it is anxious about its survival (which is in God's hands), but because it asks the freedom to remind the society or societies in which it lives of their own vulnerability and their need to stay close to some fundamental questions about the nature of the humanity they seek to nourish. Such a request from Church to society will be heard and responded to, of course, only if the Church genuinely looks as though it were speaking for more than a self-protecting set of 'religious' concerns; if it appears as concerned for something more than self-defence. To return to what was said earlier, it needs to establish its credentials as 'non-violent' – that is, as not contending against other kinds of human group for a share in ordinary political power. To put it in severely condensed form, the Church is most credible when least preoccupied with its security and most engaged with the human health of its environment; and to say 'credible' here is not to say 'popular', since engagement with this human health may run sharply against a prevailing consensus. Recent debates on euthanasia offer a case in point; and even here, it is surprisingly often claimed that the churches are concerned here only to sustain their control of human lives – which sadly illustrates what all too many in our society have come to expect of the Church.

I have spoken so far, as I was invited to do, about the Christian understanding of the role of faith in civil society, and have attempted to connect it with some of the most fundamental elements of the Christian revelation – the absolute difference of the power and action of God as against human power (embodied in the fact of Jesus' crucifixion as the climax of God's incarnate work), and the universal promise offered in the Resurrection (embodied in the mission of the Church as mediating Christ's living presence). In doing this, of course, it is impossible not to be aware of the distinct ways in which other religious traditions understand their role in relation to the ambient society. As many have observed, Islam takes as central the conviction that the law and public practice of a society ought ideally to conform to revealed law; Muslims are often puzzled by the Christian insistence on separation between the religious and the political, and it might well be thought that the vision outlined here is so antithetical to the Islamic frame of reference that there is no possible convergence. Yet there are three considerations that should make us hesitate before settling for this conclusion. The first is that, in understanding divine law as universal and equally applicable to all, Islam, like Christianity, refuses to make faith either subservient to the social order or simply an aspect among others of social life: it is something that offers transformation to the entire range of human activity. The second is that Islam itself recognizes the

reality of potential conflict between political power and faithful obedience to revealed law; nothing in Islamic tradition suggests that there could be a guarantee of fidelity to God simply through formal allegiance to Islam by the ruling authority, and the legitimacy of passive resistance to unjust authority is acknowledged. And third, the Qur'anic dictum that there is no compulsion in religion is the foundation for any Muslim account of the imperative of non-violence. This stands, of course, alongside the no less significant tradition of the imperative to jihad as the duty to defend the Muslim community wherever its integrity and survival are at risk; but the question which is bound to arise in our day is whether, given the complex realities of today's world, there would ever now be the kind of situation which would justify the same sort of defensive jihad that was envisaged in the earliest days of Islam – or whether those commentators are right who insist that the only jihad now justifiable is the struggle against evil in the heart and the resistance to a culture of cruelty and indifference to suffering, a struggle which of its nature must be non-violent.

I look forward to hearing reflection on this and related issues; but my chief point is that the convergence that occurred on this day in Johannesburg in 1906 was not an illusory or opportunistic affair. Both our faiths bring to civil society a conviction that what they embody and affirm is not a marginal affair; both claim that their legitimacy rests not on the license of society but on God's gift. Yet for those very reasons, they carry in them the seeds of a non-violent and non-possessive witness. They cannot be committed to violent struggle to prevail at all costs, because that would suggest a lack of faith in the God who has called them; they cannot be committed to a policy of coercion and oppression because that would again seek to put the power of the human believer or the religious institution in the sovereign place that only God's reality can occupy. Because both our traditions have a history scarred by terrible betrayals of this, we have to approach our civil society and its institutions with humility and repentance. But I hope that this does not mean we shall surrender what is most important – that we have a gift to offer immeasurably greater than our own words or records, the gift of a divine calling and a renewal of all that is possible from human beings.

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