

Sources of Inspiration: Moral Frameworks Supporting the Emergence of a Civil Society

Dr. Govert J. Buijs
Free University Amsterdam
Faculty of Philosophy
De Boelelaan 1105
1081 HV Amsterdam
The Netherlands
tl. +31 20 444 6683
tf. +31 02 444 6635
e-mail g.j.buijs@ph.vu.nl

0. Introduction

In the last decade the term ‘civil society’ has become almost a synonym for ‘Third Sector’, a specific sphere in society that is ‘non-governmental’ and ‘non-profit’. Not much is known about this ‘lost continent on the social landscape of modern society’.¹ During the last decade a growing quantity of research is carried out in order to fill this gap. However, a lot of this research is directed toward a description of the present day shape and size of ‘civil society’. But why do we apply the concept of ‘civil society’ to this Third Sector? If one gazes into the history of the concept of ‘civil society’ one will find quite a remarkable variation in the applications of the concept. It has been applied to society as a whole, including the political structures and the market. It has been applied to society including the market, but excluding the state (most recently during the rediscovery of the concept in Eastern Europe in the 1980-ties). It has enjoyed very favorable ratings as a sphere of neighborliness, morality and goodness (for example in the work of Adam Ferguson). But it has suffered from a very bad press as well: for Karl Marx the ‘bürgerliche Gesellschaft’ is the sphere of greediness and self-interest of the ruling class and the oppression and alienation of the proletarians. So is there any continuity to be found in these different denotations? And is there any dynamic that can help to understand these significant changes? Is there perhaps something more going on than just authors who happen to choose the definition they like almost at random?

In this paper it is argued that the changes in meaning of the concept can be seen as the intersection of two different dimensions that somehow always play a role in any definition of the concept. As Neera Chandhoke puts it: ‘The concept of civil society signifies both a space

¹ Lester M. Salamon, S. Wojciech Sokolowski, Helmut Anheier, *Social Origins of Civil Society: An Overview.*, Working Papers of The John Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, John Hopkins University, December 2000, p. 1.

and a set of values.² However, the very interesting problem in this regard seems to me to be the fact that both the ‘set of values’ and ‘the space’ are not static but dynamic and susceptible to historical changes. I propose to understand these changes as the outcome of a continuing double search. On the one hand there is a search for a right ‘set of values’, on the other hand there is a search for the most appropriate ‘space’ to realize those values. In cases that a sufficient number of people are of the opinion that they are not able to find an appropriate ‘space’ they will sooner or later go and create another one. And apparently the concept of ‘civil society’ goes with them. So the remarkable changes in the specific field of application of the term ‘civil society’ is a reflection of the different outcomes of a search for appropriate institutional carriers for what is considered to be the morally good public life. In this paper I tentatively undertake to substantiate this claim. To be sure: this paper does not contain my final word on the matter. On the contrary, it is very much ‘work in progress’.

1. Civil Society as a Quest for Public Meaning

If we may believe Dominique Colas (and I can see no reason why not) the term ‘civil society’ is a remote offspring of Aristotle’s *koinonia politikè*, the political community.³ The term entered the western scene via Melanchton, the German reformer, who produced a Latin commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*. For his commentary he used the Latin edition that had been translated by the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni. Bruni had translated Aristotle’s *koinonia politikè* as *societas civilis* and Melanchton appropriated the term subsequently. From Melanchton’s work the phrase passed by translation into the vernacular.

Why start with this quite philological overture? The Aristotelian background sheds light on a whole range of problems that today still haunt the whole conception of civil society. For Aristotle, as you may know, the phrase ‘political community’ carries connotations that are quite different from our present day talk of ‘politics’. The *koinonia politikè* refers to a sphere in which it is possible for man - as indeed it regarded men, not women - to achieve his full moral status, the goal of his life (*telos*). It was only in the public life of the *polis* that man became man. So for the Greeks, *civil society* was coextensive with the *polis* as a moral community.

What then is the problem here? Let me for a moment change the scene, from Athens in Greece to Hippo in Northern Africa (and at the same time make a leap in time of about eight centuries). Here the Church Father St. Augustine coined his phrase of *civitas terrena*, that is the equivalent of Aristotle’s *koinonia politikè* however transposed in a different key. For Augustine it no longer is the sphere of ‘moral man’, the sphere in which man can reach moral excellence. It has become the sphere of moral degradation. It is characterized by the *amor sui*, the love of self up to the hatred of God and one’s neighbor in opposition to the *amor Dei*, the love of God and one’s neighbor up to the denial of self. For Augustine the *societas civilis* or *civitas terrena* is the place where man loses his true nature and becomes tainted, yes imbued with sin. One only needs to recall his famous description of the state as a band of criminal gangsters unless divine justice radiates from the beyond of this world.

I am not primarily concerned here with the question who of the two is right, Aristotle or Augustine, but I only want to point out that apparently, when using the term ‘civil society’, one somehow enters into a fierce debate, a debate that continues somehow right until the

²Neera Chandhoke, ‘The Limits of Global Civil Society’ in: Marlies Glasius, Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier (eds.), *Global Civil Society 2002*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002, p. 45.

³Dominique Colas, *Civil Society and Fanaticism. Conjoined Histories*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press 1997, xviiiif.

present day. Apparently, using the term ‘civil society’ makes one partake into a millennial search for an answer to two closely interrelated questions (although as in the case of Augustine, these questions are not always as nicely distinguished as I am doing it here).

(1) Firstly, what can be considered to be good action, morally meaningful action or even moral excellence, especially in the public sphere?

(2) Secondly, what institution can serve as a platform for this moral action?

So *how* and *where* is the good life to be lived? What is the moral stature of man and society?

Can one speak of ‘moral man and immoral society’ (to quote the title of a famous book of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr 70 years ago) or is it just the other way around ‘immoral man and moral society’? If this approach has some truth in it one can say that the history of the concept of civil society is somehow conjoined with the history of meaning and of experiences of meaning.

The idea of the term ‘civil society’ as a kind of search warrant for investigating the moral qualities of the different societal spheres can be helpful as well to explain why the term has showed such a great elasticity. It has been applied to societies in their entirety but as well to different institutions within societies. It has been applied to the state and to the economy. In present day parlance the term is reserved more and more for two ‘non-terms’: those organizations and activities that are (1) non-governmental and (2) non-profit (and hence a phrase like ‘Third Sector’ is used as well).

Most of the time in the literature the different applications of the term are labeled as different ‘opinions’ of philosophers or social scientists. But that is a very easy way out of the difficulties that emerge here. For example, if one does not take notice of the moral stakes of the term one can easily overlook the tendency that somehow a moral judgement creeps in anyway: very often there is the silent suggestion that the terms ‘non-profit’ and ‘non-governmental’ imply as well that man’s moral capacities somehow are hampered in the spheres of either state and politics or economics and the market. This may or may not be true, but the issue has to be articulated in full daylight and not be covered behind the curtain of an allegedly value free social science.

Another example of a key issue that is easily overlooked by referring the notion back to just differing opinions is the whole problem of societal differentiation: why was the term at a given point in time not applicable any longer to society as a whole (as Aristotle did and still John Locke and even Adam Ferguson) but apparently had to be applied to a specific sector *within* society? Could it possibly be that this had something to do with modern (re)locations of experiences of normativity and meaning?

The intricate interplay between the *how* and the *where* of the good life will be the central theme of this paper. Three issues will be central in this respect. Two of them I have already mentioned but I will restate them now a bit more precise, the third regards the actual interplay between the other ones.

1. The standards of what is regarded as ‘moral excellence’ in public life. How are they achieved? What are the sources that inspire the emergence of certain standards and that are available for people to draw empowerment from them?
2. The second issue regards the specific societal sphere in which the requirements of this moral standard can be met most adequately.
3. The third issue regards the question as to what happens when there is a tension between 1 and 2, when the primarily designated institution does not ‘deliver’ or live up to the moral requirements?

In the next paragraph I will first elaborate upon the three issues. Then I will go into the modern history of the concept of civil society in order to show some instances of the actual

interplay that I just pointed at. In the following paragraphs I will firstly elucidate why it is important to give attention to what I call with Charles Taylor 'moral frameworks'. Then I will go into the characteristics of what in contemporary parlance is called by the name of 'civil society' and show what its inspiring sources have been. One characteristic is singled out: the care for what is somehow in need. I close with some brief remarks about the comparative setting of what I intend to do in subsequent research.

2. Meaning, differentiation, tension

If the original question behind the phrase civil society is kept alive the question becomes 'in what societal sphere can man's moral capacities be acted out?'. Or, to be a bit less exclusive 'where can they come to their fullest fruition?' 'What is the most appropriate sphere for man to excel morally or to acquire moral meaning?' Talking about civil society still means entering this double historical search. At least that is what I have been claiming. This implies as well that it is impossible to give a 'universally valid' definition of civil society. What 'civil society' is, is always the result of the actual interplay between what constitutes moral meaningful public action on the one hand and which institution(s) provide a platform for this action. So on the one hand we are talking about a type of action, on the other hand about a specific societal sphere where this type of action can take place.

I will briefly elaborate upon what I mean by the two 'legs' of my approach and as well briefly upon some of the tensions that can emerge between them.

What type of action am I referring to when I use words like 'meaningful' and 'moral' in relation to 'public'? It is at this stage of our investigation nothing else than 'action which takes place in public and that is valued highly in a moral sense within a certain society.' This of course gives rise immediately to a host of questions. The most urgent of these is the question what is considered to be moral in a given society and how this is determined? It is the question about the what and the wherefrom of the moral framework or moral horizon of a specific society. What is its source of inspiration? This question, which is central to this paper, will be dealt with later.

At this stage however I need to elucidate in a quite formal way what I mean by 'moral' and 'meaningful'. I will do this by drawing up a kind of 'idealtypen' in the sense of Weber. It is unavoidable that I will make quite a few assumptions here that can not be argued at this stage any further.

- (a) to live a morally good life and the experience of meaning are closely related (that is why I am speaking with this double phrase of 'moral meaningful').
- (b) the publicly moral life and hence the publicly meaningful life is not something that comes to people easily or sticks to them easily. It requires an effort. It therefore is not 'ordinary'. It has the character of an 'extra', a 'surplus', a 'more than others do' or 'more than is usual' in the sense of the Gospelwriter Matthew (5:47). One can think here as well of the distinction that Aristotle makes between 'life' and 'the good life'. It therefore may have the character of something beyond the strict requirements of public law. Often one speaks in this context of voluntariness (and hence, following De Tocqueville, about 'voluntary associations' as platforms for this type of action). Durkheim spoke in this context of the 'pre-contractual sphere' (though the prefix 'pre' is questionable here, perhaps it is better to speak of the 'extra-contractual'). In this line it can become understandable - at least that is what I hope - that later on in this paper I will make a close link between 'civil society' and

the whole phenomenon of the gift and the entire literature that in the wake of Marcel Mauss' *Essai sur le don* has been devoted to this subject.

- (c) the 'extra' in the sense just adumbrated, that constitutes the publicly moral, meaningful life, is also not directed toward the self in a direct sense but is directed toward - to use the most minimal description - 'non-self': other human beings personally, human relations, society, mankind, the world, animals, vegetative life.
- (d) exactly because we are here moving in the sphere of the 'extra', of the 'beyond necessity' it makes sense that something extra is needed to invoke or stimulate this type of action. 'Sources of inspiration' are needed to provide the energy for walking the other mile. These sources can be as diverse as a sense of being wronged, a longing for honor, a longing for justice, for the coming of the Kingdom of God (in a Christian tradition), or 'lokasamgraha' (in a Neo-Hinduist context), or it may be that one feels himself 'taken hostage by the face of the other' (to borrow a phrase from Emmanuel Levinas).
- (e) last but not least it is worth noticing that this whole range of experiences and actions can be of a private character but can as well have fully public dimensions. When we are talking about 'civil society' it is of course these public dimensions on which we focus our attention. But at the same time we should keep in mind that the public dimension of experiences of moral meaning is in competition with for example more private dimensions or even the most private dimension of one's inner life. It is fully thinkable that people withdraw from the public sphere altogether in the case that this is experienced not (in some cases: not anymore) to be a platform for meaningful action. Just notice in this respect that for Max Weber modernity forces on people the choice to become either a world-averse mystic or a bureaucrat.

This brings us to the second 'leg' of my analysis of civil society. Where is it possible to represent or to act out, to incarnate man's moral destiny? Is it possible in this world to be moral at all? And where does 'being moral' lead one? Isn't the road to hell paved with good intentions? On this second axis one can see the meaning of 'civil society' oscillate between different institutions, on the search as it were for a locus of morality and meaning. For what will happen to a society where the ultimate choice is indeed that between mysticism and bureaucracy? Where apparently no sphere of society is deemed worthy to provide a platform for man's search for meaning? The result might be a widespread apolitism, escapism and/or cynicism regarding the public sphere. And what will happen when people do not nicely confine themselves to the Weberian alternative and are starting to look for public meaning nevertheless?

Fortunately the dilemma is way too strict. For this second axis turns out to be as well a field of great creativity, that expresses itself in the creative buildup of new public spaces, like free associations, opinion movements, social movements (old and new), charity funds, etc. etc., either within the confines of specific political communities or even beyond, at a global level.⁴ In all kind of ways people create opportunities to become publicly involved, even sometimes in the case of severe dictatorships. So one can safely say that this is a very dynamic part of the concept of civil society.

One of the central problems that is at stake here is the differentiation of society. The term 'civil society' starts to change its meaning quite remarkably at the time when society starts to differentiate itself in quite separate societal spheres. These spheres develop their own logic, even their own type of morality.

⁴ Michael Walzer (ed.), *Toward a Global Civil Society*, Providence, R.I., [etc.] Berghahn Books 1998.

This brings us to our third problem. What are the consequences of this differentiation in terms of ‘moral meaningful action’? How is a differentiated society experienced by its inhabitants? Will they in a sense ‘mirror’ the differentiation and become fragmented people? Or will they start to somehow pick and choose one sphere and endow their actions within this sphere with the garments of morality and meaning: right or wrong, my sphere, business is business, politics is politics, *l’art pour l’art*? Is it still possible within the different spheres to live moral meaningful lives? Or will people start to withdraw into the private sphere and practically leave the public sphere altogether (probably only to return to public life in most unexpected ways and most unexpected moments)? And what does it mean for the different spheres themselves? Can they sustain a basic openness to the call of a normative horizon or do they become closed in in themselves (business is business, politics is..., etc.)?

These three questions form the basis for the three parts of this paper, although it will be the first part that is dealt with most extensively.

Further lines of investigation suggest themselves easily: in a comparative context it is highly interesting to ask what kind of ‘moral sources’ are available in different cultures and what kind of institutions can function as platform for incarnating these moral impulses. These questions however will not be dealt with extensively in this paper.

3. ‘Civil Society’ as a Moral Quest

As was indicated above, the very term ‘civil society’ always invokes the problem of moral authority, whatever may be its specific referent. For Aristotle it is very clear: only the polis can call forth the morally good in man. Of course a certain hesitation can be felt in as far as the *bios theoretikos*, the contemplative life, is valued above the active life of politics. But in the final analysis it remains the polis which is the true and only locus where man can realize his moral nature. Augustine takes issue with this Aristotelian position. The entire history of the debate about the problem can not concern us here.⁵ But to substantiate my claim about the term ‘civil society’ as a search for the how and where of the moral meaningful life it is necessary to undertake some explorations in the further history of the concept. I hope that the very brief outline suffices to show that indeed the questions as I have identified them assert themselves time and again in the history of the concept.

As a starting point I take the period in which so to say the first and second questions actually began to interact in a very visible way, the early modern period. I have already mentioned briefly the very different positions of Aristotle and Augustine. One can safely state that up to the work of John Locke the term ‘civil society’ refers to the social and political sphere *in toto* which may or may not be valued positively. The defining oppositions are either the spheres of church, monastery and heaven or the sphere of an earthly paradise as expected and sometimes established experimentally by the religious fanatics (the Anabaptist experiment of the City of God in Münster being the most infamous example).⁶

But quite a new phase in the history of the term is entered in the 18th century when a process of societal differentiation takes off.

Perhaps it is not exaggerated to state that the very last attempt to analyze ‘civil society’ as a unified, in principle still undifferentiated moral whole is Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ferguson (1723-1816) was one of the leading stars of what came to

⁵ See Colas, *o.c.*, and especially John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society. The Critical History of an Idea*, New York: New York University Press 1999.

⁶ Colas, *o.c.*, 99-181.

be known as the 'Scottish Enlightenment'. His attempt was an answer to an impasse that was the result of the analyses of the origins of civil society as an artificial contract between hostile or at least somewhat suspicious individuals. Both Hobbes and Locke had founded human society on the quite shaky basis of an individual interest calculus. But for Ferguson this does not do justice to the fact that people often simply enjoy being together. The togetherness of man is not something odd but is just quite natural. Man is a social being in the first place. For Ferguson society as a whole, the social and the political as well as the economical, was based on a single moral source, to which all people had a natural access, benevolence or 'love of mankind'.⁷ Seligman concludes: 'For the Scottish thinkers, civil society meant primarily a realm of solidarity held together by the force of moral sentiments and natural affections.'⁸ Seligman calls this the 'classical idea of civil society' that consisted of 'an ethical vision of social life'.⁹

This whole vision was already undermined earlier by the conspicuous work of Bernard de Mandeville (to whose challenge Ferguson was also responding). In his famous *Fable of the Bees*, with the subtitle *Private Vices, Publick Benefits* he had argued that in society man do not need to behave morally for the consequences of moral action in public life are not too profitable, to say the least. Only if man are behaving viciously the public sphere will produce the best outcome.

The moral theories of the Scottish Enlightenment can be seen as an ongoing contest with De Mandeville. With Ferguson and Adam Smith's early work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* it seems that De Mandeville is on the losing side. But with Hume and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* he is clearly in the winning mood again. With Hume's rigid distinction between the 'is' and the 'ought' the unbelief in a morally coherent universe gets the upper hand. And Adam Smith is realizing that Christian morality is withdrawing from the public sphere: 'Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property is in reality instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all.'¹⁰

Seligman sums up what is at stake in the debate: 'To a great extent the developing idea of civil society is - within the Scottish Enlightenment - an attempt to find, or rather posit, a synthesis between a number of developing oppositions that were increasingly felt in social life. These oppositions, between individual/social, private/public, egoism/altruism, as well as between a life governed by reason or by passions, have in fact become constitutive of our existence in the modern world.'¹¹

Reflecting upon this development we feel compelled to ask the question: what has happened between Ferguson and Smith? The answer does not seem to be too difficult to find: the free market developed even much stronger than De Mandeville could have ever expected, with its epicenter in Great Britain. Its result was that the public sphere could no longer be experienced as a field for moral meaningful action. It seems that what actually happened was a incisive redrawing of what Joan Tronto has called 'moral boundaries'.¹² The moral meaningful aspects of human life withdrew into the private sphere. The public life became primarily a place for the management of passions.¹³

⁷ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*,

⁸ Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ John Ehrenberg, p. 104.

¹¹ Seligman, *o.c.*, p. 25.

¹² Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, New York/London: Routledge 1993.

¹³ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests. Political arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977.

How ambivalent the notion of civil society had become within a couple of decades is attested by Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*. The term 'civil society' has become here the 'bürgerliche Gesellschaft'. It no longer is a place of great moral significance. On the contrary. Morality for Hegel is something which is learned in the private sphere of the family (thesis). In society it is turned down under (anti-thesis), only to resurface again in the state and now no longer on a particular level (as it was in the family) but on a general level (synthesis). So society is the sphere of the pursuit of private interests outside the strictly private sphere. Here men are competitors. And yet, somehow the moral stature of man (gained in the sphere of the family) is not really lost in civil society. In civil society man can express himself, being his own man. And in the pursuit of one's own needs, a system is formed in which people become mutually dependent, satisfy each others needs and create a world of free social relationships. 'Hegel knew his Adam Smith', as John Ehrenberg remarks.¹⁴ So the ethical moment of family life is preserved somehow, but the true individuality of man is at the same time secured. Man is both at the very same time an individual and a social being. It was Marx who could not be satisfied with Hegel's balancing act. Notwithstanding Hegel's attempt to save the moral stature of public life, for Marx civil society is indeed primarily and only the field of alienation for a great number of people.

The development of the idea is summarized by Seligman: 'The ambiguity of the concept (sc. of civil society, GJB) is as well attested by such famous characterizations of it by Adam Smith and Karl Marx respectively. For Adam Smith - in the tradition of the Scottish enlightenment - it is the realm of 'natural affections and sociability' while for Karl Marx it is the arena in which man 'acts as a private individual, regards other men as means, degrades himself into a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers'.¹⁵

What can be concluded from this brief survey of the term 'civil society'?

The first conclusion is that indeed there are two axes around which the problem revolves. 'What was common to all attempts to articulate a notion of civil society was the problematic relation between the private and the public, the individual and the social, public ethics and individual interests, individual passions and public concerns.'¹⁶ Time and again we find the double problem of what constitutes ethical or moral life and where the platform is to be found to live it.

A second conclusion is that the concept of civil society immediately brings up the question of the treatment of others: for Kant it is the sphere in which men treat each other as ends and not as means. This claim was of course fiercely contested by Marx: exactly in civil society people are treating each others as means for their own fulfillment. But at the very same time that Marx is criticizing Kant he is actually confirming the Kantian standards. For this sphere in which men treat each other as means is for Marx a sphere of alienation, in my terms: loss of meaning. So in a sense Marx as well is confirming the moral status of civil society - *sub contrario* as it were.

A third conclusion is that indeed the term draws attention to key terms that somehow refer to certain moral frameworks, to inspiring sources: benevolence, mutuality, 'Sittlichkeit', love of mankind etc.

A fourth - and rather disquieting - conclusion is that apparently society as a whole in the course of the late 18th century was not able to retain the moral qualification it had before. And because of the fact that society as a whole was still denoted as 'civil society' the concept

¹⁴ John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society. The Critical History of an Idea*. New York: New York University Press 1999, p. 125.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, Zur Judenfrage, quoted in Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society*, 3.

¹⁶ Seligman, *o.c.*, 5.

of 'civil society' became a tainted concept. More and more the 'care for others' which was central still for Ferguson became a private affair. The picture of society became more and more that of autonomous systems, that could not be reached anymore by moral voices. On the one hand one can rightly say that different societal spheres 'came into their own' in and through a process of differentiation. But at the same time it seems to be the case that normative considerations are no longer able to make themselves heard. The only thing possible seemed to be private 'after-care'. The 19th century became the great century of private charity and of voluntary associations.

And the question has to be addressed: why has this moral point of view in society thus been limited to a certain, in itself quite powerless sphere? What has happened to public morality? What has happened to care-for-others? Did the moral sources like benevolence lose their robust inspiring power (if they ever had it)?

And: is this the arrangement of society that the West has exported to other parts of the world? Or are there within other cultures perhaps moral sources that have prevented this development from becoming all encompassing? And are there perhaps even in the West older moral sources that might help to evaluate these developments?

4. Moral horizons and the genesis of moral, meaningful action

The public sphere is not the only platform of meaning that is available for man. This awareness is already fully present in Aristotle, for there is as well the *bios theoretikos*, the contemplative life, that in certain respects reaches even higher than the political life. We even can see that after the death of Aristotle a kind of separation has taken place between the polis and the philosophical 'schools'. The schools developed into a kind of monastic orders, withdrawn from public life.

Moreover, under the sacred canopy of the Roman Empire one encounters the mystery cults, membership of which also provided meaning for many, but withdrawn from the public sphere. And after the appearance of Christ the Christian *ecclesia* entered the scene which was sociologically a type *sui generis*, partly public, partly non-public, though never 'private' in the 'familial' or 'household' sense of the word. The liturgy in the old church for example was carefully divided into a public part, including the sermon and a non-public part, of which the Eucharist was the key element. The Lord's Supper actually took place behind curtains after the non-confessing part of the audience had been asked to leave.¹⁷

And of course there is always the private sphere proper, the sphere of the household and/or the nuclear family.

So the public sphere is in a constant competition, as it were, with other spheres as to which is the most suitable platform or carrier for the experience of meaning. Therefore a vivid civil society is never a matter of course but is always a highly contextual matter. People may find meaning in public life or they may withdraw from it and look for meaning elsewhere. Seen from the angle of the public sphere there is always the danger of 'a-politism' or escapism. What can be factors that can tip the scales toward one side or the other? It is here that the notions of 'moral framework' or 'moral ontology' or 'moral horizon' come in as they have been developed by Charles Taylor.¹⁸ It refers to a set of moral intuitions that within a given cultural context have a certain degree of obviousness and hence are practically not questioned any longer. They have sunken into a kind of deep-level everydayness.

¹⁷ F. van der Meer, *Augustinus de zielzorger*.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press 1989.

The moral horizon contains certain basic beliefs about the world and about one's place in it; basic beliefs as well about the value of other human beings and about the nature of the relationships between them; basic beliefs as well about what constitutes a good or meaningful life. This horizon can be described as the scale of dominant values within a society. It is shaped by the moral stories, moral intuitions and explicit moral guidelines, that are passed on in a certain society or a culture and that inspire or, as Taylor calls it, 'empower' people to lead a certain kind of life. These notions in their turn are often rooted in deep intuitions about the world and about the meaning of life in the world - and thus the 'moral horizon' touches on the realm of the religious. The notion of 'moral horizons' draws attention not primarily to the individual motivation of people (e.g. the egoistic-altruistic dilemma) but to the more general cultural background, that might partly make understandable differences in what is considered to be civil society and what is going on within it. 'To love one's neighbor' (the Christian *caritas*) for example is not one of the classical (Platonic or Aristotelian) virtues but it now is still a maxime that is supported by many even when they do not see themselves as Christian. It is somehow engrained in the moral horizon.

However, that these horizons are cultural, contextual is already an indication of the fact that they are subject to change, albeit a very long-range change. We are talking here about centuries, even millennia. For Taylor, the Western notion of the 'self' is the result of a long-drawn development in the reflection upon what it means to be human, as it took place in Greek philosophy, early Christianity, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Each of these movements were in a sense building upon each other, while at the same time they often suppressed elements that were considered essential in such an earlier movement. So the specific 'moral horizon' of a certain society will very often be a highly specific mixture of more and less articulated intuitions that have formed themselves in a long, long history, reaching back in time toward times immemorial, toward civilizations that as such perhaps don't exist anymore, toward charismatic persons like prophets, philosophers, or founders of religions, toward experiences of rational enlightenment or divine revelation, of mystical lapses and very concrete sufferings of peoples (think of Israel's exodus), experiences of liberation and victory or of defeat and disaster.

And of course all these experiences are going on presently and indefinitely toward the future. The moral horizon of a culture therefore can never be fixed and never be analyzed exhaustingly. One has to draw quite general pictures here, often involving only 'family-resemblances' as Wittgenstein called it. And the criterion here is that the pictures drawn have to make sense to at least a sufficient number of people that find themselves within the moral horizon that is pictured.

And even then individual people might locate themselves differently within that horizon. And to complicate the matter even more: when a sufficient number of people is locating themselves in a specific area of the pictured horizon, the center of the horizon starts to wander and hence the horizon itself changes.

And yet, having made due allowances for all this fluidity, there are definite and marked differences between the moral horizons that are present in various cultures. And if this is so it also is not at all farfetched to assume that *some moral horizons are more conducive to the emergence of a civil society, as it is understood today, than others.*

This in itself might appear to be a very disquieting suggestion. The problem is clear: if the emergence of a 'civil society' is intimately bound up with a specific cultural sphere, with a specific history, with its own specific religious events and experiences etc. - is it then in any way possible to transplant this notion toward other parts of the world where we encounter a different culture and a different religious context?

Ernest Gellner, who analyzed what he called the (cultural) 'Conditions of Liberty' is quite clear on this point.

'What point is there in vaunting our values and condemning the commitment of others to absolutist transcendentalism or demanding communalism? They are what they are, and we are what we are: if they were us, they would have ours. I am not a relativist (B)ut all the same, preaching across cultural boundaries seems to me in most circumstances a fairly pointless exercise.'¹⁹

But is there perhaps yet any basis for (maybe not: preaching, but at least:) communicating across cultural boundaries? In order to make any progress on this question we must take a concrete realization of civil society and then look into what are its specific inspiring sources.

5. *Civil Society: a Contemporary Delineation*

Until now in this paper I took my bearings from a still very empty notion of civil society, while claiming that the actual content of any existing 'civil society' is highly contextual and historical. This was done in order to show that differing opinions about what civil society are not a defect of the term or a defect of present day social scientists or theorists but that it is inherent in the civil society discours as it was inaugurated by Aristotle: a search for public meaning and for an appropriate institution.

It is now time to reverse this procedure somewhat and to propose a delineation of how civil society is understood today in order to go backwards as it were into the specific search that has resulted in this notion of civil society.

Alongside the spheres that are all somehow related to the care for one's own (either oneself or one's family-relatives), there is also a sphere in which people freely join together with known and unknown others to pursue a common goal often directed to the care for that what lags behind or is not cared for. So my preliminary definition is:

'civil society' as we see it now emerging is a sphere in which people, personally, but mostly in a joint venture, take supportive/protective action for 'others', for human beings personally or as a group, animals, vegetative life, to achieve a more normative fulfillment for these 'others' and hence for themselves.

This 'civil society' functions in several ways:

1. as a critique of (and invitation toward) the political sphere: advocacy
2. as a critique of (and invitation toward) the economic sphere: exposure of misbehavior
3. as an impatient forerunner: doing certain things already that should be done by someone else, either a political or an economic actor. Civil society for example does not wait until political structures are changed, but it itself takes the initiative.
4. as a 'garbage-can': to undertake tasks that nobody else fulfills and that at least partially repairs some of the misdevelopments or results thereof within other societal spheres.

Now the resources for articulating this 'civil society' -ethos may not be available in all cultures in the same degree. And hence: it might be that not all cultures will develop a 'civil society' as it is oftentimes hoped for, for example in contemporary development thinking. The preconditions for the emergence of a civil society are perhaps not universally present. Try to imagine what set of basic beliefs (*ethos*) are involved in the idea of civil society as I have tried to expose it. In order to be active in civil society one has to have internalized somehow some basic intuitions, some very basic points of view, a basic ethos.

¹⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 214.

Firstly, there has to be at least a certain awareness that (all kind of situations in) the world are not just what they are but are somehow susceptible to humanly induced change: meaningful action is possible. This is not a matter of course. On the contrary, there are several religions and worldviews that evoke a much more fatalistic interpretation of the world. World and society can be experienced as essentially unchangeable. The powers that be can be experienced as ordained by God or other divine beings, just as they are. This can be the case even in a very modern context: the whole notion of the free market as a superhuman 'mechanism' that has its own sacrality and hence is not to be interfered with is perhaps best interpreted as a revival of a fatalistic class of experiences.

Secondly, there is presupposed an awareness that not society at large or the state is (the only) actor responsible for taking action, but that it is I or We as a group (empowerment). This is not a matter of course either. The anthropologist Geert Hofstede in his analysis of cultural differences has identified as one of the 'axes of difference' the dimension of 'power distance', the degree in which people view the locus of power to be quite remote from their own position.²⁰ In societies where the power distance is great people tend to look first to the more powerful or the hierarchically higher persons to take action. These societies tend to be more 'state-oriented' than societies where the power distance is smaller and hence the growth of a civil society will encounter difficulties. Part of this is as well the awareness that there might be a difference between might and right, and therefore that one has to always on the alert for the possibility that there might be a difference between what a state or a political community decides and what is right.

Thirdly, there has to be an awareness that the 'object' of my or our responsible caring action is not a priori limited to the persons to which I am attached through family-relations or to my or our own habitat: a more or less universal orientation (that does not preclude very local and concrete action). So in societies where social relationships are mainly organized along lines of blood-relationship it can be quite hard to build up a civil society.

Fourthly, helping the weak and needy must be considered to be an essential part of the moral meaningful life (in opposition to for example all kind of warrior ethics, or neo-Darwinian ethical paradigms of winners vs. losers etc.).

So implicit in a civil society is an ethos of responsibility, or to be a bit more precise: of caring responsibility. How did this ethos come about in the course of Western history and what happened to it?

Apparently this caring responsibility is not a purely natural attribute of human nature nor does it always hold the same place in the human scale of values. It is tempting to draw already one conclusion from this: if care for the weak (however specified) is not a pre-given, constant attribute of human nature, but something that varies from culture to culture, one has to inquire for the inspirational sources that influenced the specific scale of values in which this type of action came out high.

6. Sources of inspiration: probing the history of care

The 'care for the poor' is a specific instance of the class of actions that I have identified earlier as 'public meaningful action'. The care for the poor is not the only instance of this class. It contains as well other voluntary actions that are directed toward some public good,

²⁰ Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and organizations : software of the mind*, London [etc.] : McGraw-Hill 1991. (Dutch tr. *Allemaal andersdenkenden*).

some good-for-others. In this paragraph I will deal with some of them at some length. In this way it can be shown that 'care for the poor' is not simply a matter of course in societies.

(a) *Potlatch*

At first sight the potlatch seems to belong in this class. It was the anthropologist Marcel Mauss who in his *Essai sur le don* drew attention to this curious phenomenon among indigenous peoples at the North West Coast of North America.²¹ Potlatches were public gift-parties, in which the host and his relatives lavishly distributed gifts to invited guests, who were expected to accept any gifts offered with the understanding that at a future time they were to reciprocate in kind. Gifts distributed included foodstuffs, slaves, copper plates, and goats hair blankets, as well as less tangible things such as names, songs, dances, and crests. In return, the host was accorded prestige and status in direct proportion to his expenditures. In the 19th century the institution deteriorated in destruction parties, in which rival chiefs competed for prestige by destroying publicly all their property even before it was given away. In its most extreme cases even people were involved in this destructive activity and they were killed in the process. So Mauss called this an 'agonistic' type of gift-giving, for here giving (and later on even destroying) of goods was part of a power struggle, a struggle for social prestige of oneself and one's clan. Here the gift is obviously a public action but at the same time the receiver of the gifts has somewhat gone out of sight.

Other instances of public gift-giving that anthropologists have uncovered are less extreme but still are part of an agonistic system. Among the Tobriand Islanders Malinowski found a quite elaborate system of gift-giving. However here as well the element of 'show' and prestige was all important: ceremonial gifts of food were often displayed so long that they were completely rotten at the time they reached the beneficiaries.

Deeply in the background of this practice we must still assume the presence of a moral framework and a moral intuition according to which it is not good when people are possessive about their own goods: it is better to give than to receive. Why else can exactly giving develop into a means of getting prestige? But from a moral point of view it seems that the side-effect of the moral act has somehow taken over the meaning of the act and covered the original moral impulse.

This is what Mauss seems to suggest as well, as Godelier points out.²² For although Mauss devotes almost all his attention to the potlatch it is only one instance of a whole class of what he calls 'total prestations' acts of giving and sharing that bind people together in a society on all levels of their existence: socially, religiously, juridically, esthetically, economically. These need not be agonistic, although there apparently is a strong tendency to see these actions in this perspective.

What is interesting about the types of gift-giving that Mauss is analyzing is that they still take place at a pre-differentiated level. What the gift does is therefore not confined to one subsection of society while other sections are not touched by its impact. The contractual exchange relations (that are also present in the archaic societies) are embedded in non-contractual relations. The gift-relationship is therefore not yet a sentimentalized private matter but has a public status.

²¹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, New York/London: W.W. Norton 1967, (tr. by Ian Cunnison of *Essai sur le don*, 1925).

²² Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1999 tr. by Nora Scott of *L'Énigme du don*, 1996), p. 36v.

(b) *Euergesiai*

Another type of public action with the eye to some public good is to be found in the Greek and Roman cities of antiquity. The chronicler of this type has been Paul Veyne, who identified it as 'euergetism'.²³ This was a kind of informal institution meaning that communities expected the well-to-do in their midst to contribute from their wealth to the public expenses, mostly public events like festivals, theaterplays, entertainments in the circus or the construction of public buildings like bridges and temples.²⁴ It is perhaps best compared to our 'sponsoring'. At least it had most of the time the same goal, making well-known the name of the good giver, the benefactor. Sometimes this was entirely voluntary, sometimes it was the consequence of being elected or appointed to a public office, which carried the obligation to pay for one's own expenses in public office. Another case was the legacy fund or testamentary foundations, in which a wealthy person could leave behind a part of his capital for a specific purpose, for example to maintain a school or to have every year a commemorating banquet at his expense in a certain temple after his death - or just to drinking clubs to provide them with free drinks for many years.²⁵

In general euergetism was not meant for a specific group, for example the poor, but it was offered to the city as a whole, that is to all citizens. And in cases that there was a shortage of affordable food then one of the well-to-do provided free corn, however to all the citizens, not only to the poor. The equality was not broken. So euergetism didn't have a redistributive goal. There are at least three moral sources for this type of public action. The first is *philotimia*, the longing to distinguish oneself and be honored by ones fellow citizens.²⁶ The other motive is something like patriotism or the love of ones hometown, sometimes in situations that one had left the city and then later on returned.

The third inspiring source is the longing for some kind of immortality, by securing one's 'eternal' memory by erecting something lasting, either a building or another kind of memorial like a memorial foundation. (In cases that a city decided to honor one of its benefactors with a statue it was good usage for the benefactor to provide himself the money for this costly venture).

For Veyne what euergetism comes down to at the end of the day is the affirmation and constant re-affirmation of the 'social superiority' of the governing elites, the leading classes. In the Roman cities the function of euergetism went even further: here it was quite explicitly a means to reign over man's minds, to win the heart of the people in order to secure their permanent obedience.²⁷ So here it is part of kind of unwritten social contract after all. The Roman oligarchs wanted to be loved, not externally obeyed.

This type of loving relationship between the ruler and the ruled becomes even more pregnant in the case of the Imperial order that was established in Rome by Augustus. Being 'euergetes' or benefactor became more and more an exclusive title of the emperor. The relation between emperor and people became more and more modeled after the image of private family-relations, the emperor being the father, the citizens his very own children. His benevolent deeds therefore gain the character of benefits conferred upon children. The pompous circus-shows became the most important part of this *euergesiai*.

²³ Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses. Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism*, London: Allen Lane/Penguin 1990. (abrd. ed., tr. by Brian Pearce of *Le pain et le cirque*, 1976).

²⁴ Note that for example the classical Greek cities didn't know something like direct taxation. Veyne, p. 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 110ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110f

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 259f.

(c) *Agape, caritas*

Veyne made a strong contrast between euergetism and the Christian *caritas*. In a masterful study the classical historian H. Bolkestein has shed light on the specific background of the Christian notion of charity against the background of the pre-Christian classical world.²⁸ He found quite a remarkable difference between the Greek and Roman social morality on the one hand and the oriental morality (notably Egypt and Israel) on the other. Both types concur in the adhortation to treat with special care one's parents and other relatives, elderly people and friends. But the oriental morality then singles out another category that is virtually absent from the Greek and Roman morality, the poor. The whole distinction between rich and poor as a distinction that has moral implications is not found in the classical sources. This implies as well that virtues like 'justice' and 'liberality' have markedly different connotations in both civilizational areas. 'Liberality' for example has in the Greek and Roman context to do with giving towards one's equals or to the citizenry as a whole. In Egypt and Israel the poor are singled out as a specific 'object' of generosity. Aristotle even denies that the giving of alms is a virtue at all. The *philanthropeia* has to do with the establishment of a sense of togetherness between equals. One gives in order to be given in return. Giving is a way to establish a special reciprocal relationship.

The moral source of this special position of the poor is the thought, to be found in Egypt, in Mesopotamia and Israel but not in Greece or Rome, that the highest God is at the same time the special protector of the poor and the needy. Bolkestein is rather down-to-earth about the explanation of this difference. It is not a matter of the orientals being 'softer' and the occidentals being more 'severe' in their morals. According to Bolkestein the difference has more to do with the fact that the oriental societies were very hierarchical societies with great social differences. The only way to balance this inequality a little bit and to grind off the rough edges was to forge a special bond between the top of the pyramid and the bottom, between the deity and king on the one hand and the poor on the other. On the contrary, in the Greek cities there had already been all kinds of early social reforms that had leveled out the greatest social inequalities (e.g. Solon's reform in Athens). All citizens were equal before the law. On the other hand there were the slaves, but they were taken care of within the extended families of which they were a part. There was no free 'proletariat' so to say.

However, if we examine Bolkestein's materials with an eye to the problem of the moral sources, his picture changes slightly. There is already the obvious fact that Israel was not a very hierarchical society at all, as far as the sources do allow for this conclusion (Bolkestein admits this as well). The materials suggest a marked difference between Egypt and more generally the Oriental outlook on the one hand and Israel's view of the poor on the other hand. For in Egypt the decisive moral source seems to be a sense of cosmic justice in the sense of a cosmic balance of forces, a balance of good and evil, as it realizes itself in every individual life. So the poor will be compensated for their misery in the afterlife, and the rich will be 'compensated' for their good fortune in the very same afterlife. In this context it becomes very rational to give freely. Freely reducing one's good fortune here will make the misery in the afterlife a little less deep. The moral sources here seem to be of an almost utilitarian nature.

In Israel however (and Bolkestein himself is pointing this out), the thought of an afterlife is not very clearly developed, let alone that it is part of a 'system of compensation'. Here, and apparently here only, we find the 'divine love' as moral source.

²⁸ H. Bolkestein, *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum. Ein Beitrag zum Problem "Moral und Gesellschaft"*, Utrecht: A. Oosthoek 1939 (repr. 1967).

It is exactly this that is explicated and intensified in the Christian *caritas*.²⁹ Its motivation seems to be primarily - and as an 'idealtipe' - the expression of gratitude. Paul Ricoeur has formulated this very aptly by contrasting the *dout des* of Roman antiquity with what he calls '*do quia mihi datum est*' (I give because much is given to me).³⁰

In the work of Thomas Aquinas we find one of the 'classical' Christian analyses of *caritas*. Three characteristics stand out here. The first one is that it is one of the theological, not of the natural virtues. The implication of this is exactly the turn around that Ricoeur pointed at. Human relationships are freed from the restriction of symmetry or reciprocity. In principle, one is inspired ('infused') to persevere in doing good, even in cases when there is no 'return on investment' thinkable (like burying anonymous corpses on the Italian seashore, as Christians are reported to have done).

The second is that exactly because it is a virtue, it is not dependent upon the niceness or loveliness of the person I love (or the matter I care for). So for Aquinas, love is a kind of general openness to the good, notwithstanding the fact that this 'good' might be very hard to detect in the concrete situation or in the concrete person. Everyone who is and all what is, is created by God and hence love of God implies a basic affirmation of all what is. It harks back to Augustine's definition of love as saying *volo, quod sis* (I want you to be). That the *caritas* is a virtue also implies that it is - quite Aristotelian - part of my 'perfection', my reaching my goal, as a human being. It is not a means for acquiring something else, a kind of self-realization, that is still higher. So every possibility that a state of detachedness could come out best is precluded. The human being who reaches its goal is 'attached', is 'engaged'. The relationship with ones fellow-creatures is an inherent part of human fullness. So the basic picture here is not that of the 'punctual self' that establishes itself as a monad and then subsequently enters into relationships that are a 'duty' or a burden to this self. No, the basic picture is here that a person cannot be fully man without the other. The divine grace gives me to myself but is in the same manner present in my neighbor.

Thirdly, as the theology of almsgiving in the Early Church shows, giving to the poor was not optional or a matter of pure grace. The poor as loved by God, were *entitled* to have their daily bread. Time and again in the writings of the Church Fathers, one finds reiterated that because of the love of God for our fellow human being, he or she has a right to our own possessions, that we have received ourselves. A man's possessions are not absolutely his own, they are entrusted to him in order to do good.

The theological character of the *caritas* has its consequences for the 'publicity' that surrounds the gift. One no longer needs the public recognition of the gift and hence of one's own moral status. Even stronger: public recognition would disturb the new 'economy of transcendence'. In the Sermon on the Mount there is a telling passage out of which the core of the Christian notion of *caritas* can be derived: do not thy good works in order to be seen by others, for then you already will have your reward. Let not your left hand know what your right hand does.

It is not my intention to simply award a first prize to Christian morality, but to uncover the moral sources of what I believe is one of the key notions in our present day conception of

²⁹ See for a more in-depth treatment of this notion Douglas J. den Uyl, 'The Right to Welfare and the Virtue of Charity' in: Ellen Frankel Paul a.o. (eds.), *Altruism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, pp. 192-224.; Paul Moyaert, *De mateloosheid van het christendom. Over naastenliefde, beteknisincarnatie en mystieke liefde*, Nijmegen: Sun 1998; Grietje Dresen, 'Oefening van liefde. Inhoud en publieke betekenis van een *caritas*-ethiek' in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 42 (2002), 3-14.

³⁰ D.W.J.M. (Dorien) Pessers, *Liefde, solidariteit en recht. Een interdisciplinair onderzoek naar het wederkerigheidsbeginsel*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 1999, p.46v.

civil society for better and for worse. For there are also inherent problems with this notion. Let me just identify some of the most urgent ones in this respect. Does the universal character of the *caritas* not somehow wipe out the unique individuality of sincere relationships between people? If I love everyone, do I then really love anyone? Is 'universal love' not a *contradictio in terminis*? Does not everyone constitute an 'occasion' for doing good? So is it ever possible to enter into real, concrete relationships on the basis of *caritas*? The problem can be felt within many charitable institutions, who somehow feel obliged to help everybody and are therefore spreading themselves too thin and actually end up helping nobody, in the meantime causing severe burn-outs among their own workers. Another problem is the dependency that can be caused by the simple 'doing good'. Is it possible for the *caritas* to affirm the own responsibility of the beneficiaries and to give this a concrete content without losing its character? A third problem is the tendency - that is not to be found in the writings of the early Church Fathers nor as it seems in the medieval theology of charity and poverty³¹, but nevertheless has become very strong in later times - to separate love from justice. A fourth problem is the question whether the whole notion of *caritas* does not still show the hierarchical social background in which it got its first embodiment. The classical Marxist critique is still worth considering at this point.

But exactly because these are still the dilemma's within many modern civil organizations they attest to the fact that the tradition of *caritas* is one of the defining moral sources of present day civil society. Helping the weak as the paradigm of the fulfilling life: it is clear that the appearance of Jesus Christ has made a remarkable impact in the ancient world, amounting to something like an 'Umwertung aller Werte'. In the West this was again paradigmatically reiterated by St. Francis and the various poverty-movements. The Church developed its 'diakonia', its service to all who are in need. The Christian notion of *caritas* has indeed become one of the constitutive elements of the Western system of care: poor houses, leper houses, hospitals, orphanages. In spite of all its factual deficiencies, the ethos was affirmed again and again throughout the centuries of the Christian tradition. That already at a quite early stage the distinctiveness of this Christian practice of love was recognized is attested by a letter of Emperor Julianus who wrote around 360 to Arsacius, a pagan high priest in Galatia, exhorting him to build shelters for the poor, the ill and for orphans 'like the godless Galileans did, who through their philanthropy have converted very many people.'

It is not possible to analyze here the entire history of 'what was and is considered to be 'doing good toward others' and the inspirational sources for this type of action. But it can be demonstrated briefly that the moral sources may change and that as a consequence it becomes more difficult to support a certain type of action. Consider the following instances.

(d) *Benevolence (Ferguson) and the naturalization of goodness*

As already indicated, in the Scottish Enlightenment we find an explicit attempt to keep up the Christian notion of *caritas* while at the same time dispensing with the Christian 'salvation economy' with its notions of sin and guilt, penance and forgiveness, of *gratia infusa* and inner renewal. What was considered to be a supernatural gift now is presented as an innate, natural attribute of man and hence it seems that the 'agapeic logic' of Christianity (*do quia mihi*

³¹ A beautiful impression of how the notion of *caritas* functioned at a 'grassroots level' (an analysis of the theology of poverty of the lower clergy, everyday sermons on charity and poverty, and how this all was put into practice), is given in Miri Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987.

datum est) is broken on principle, though at first not in practice. The benevolence of the Scottish thinkers becomes one of the natural dispositions of man, a matter of course. However, it somehow does not fit into this world anymore. The bridge between man's benevolent nature and the public world is broken down. There is a rift between the world as-it-is and the world as-we-would-like-it-to-be (Hume).

(e) *Compassion (Rousseau)*

Most notable here is that what formerly was the virtue of *caritas* now becomes one of the passions after all. Instead of a virtue that stands opposite to the passions the feelings that are aroused in us by the encounter with the concrete suffering of others now become center stage. But in the inner field of passions every passion has the same change of getting realized. It just depends on how strong its impulse is. What we see emerging here are the contours of our modern highly emotion-driven 'charity business', the fierce competition to arouse the strongest feelings of compassion and hence the greatest cash flow.

(f) *Altruism*

August Comte is the person that coined the phrase 'altruism'.³² He invented the term in conscious opposition to the Christian notion of love or *caritas*. 'Altruism is the neologism of Comte to express the bond of the brotherhood of man without a common father'³³ Here no longer one can speak of a 'watered down' version of the Christian *caritas*, it is a full blown substitute. What Comte abhorred in Christianity was its pervasive 'egoism'. The orientation toward a supernatural God produced egoistic men, only concerned with their own salvation. Altruism now becomes the feeling of togetherness in a common project of scientific subjection of the earth. But Comte is not very sure about the stability of these feelings. Might man not turn against each other at some unexpected moment? So Comte has to organize a substitute religion to induce these feelings. Therefore he advocates the 'institutionalization of the emotional life' by means of a 'religion of humanity' that would circle around this 'altruism'.

(g) *The unmasking of benevolence (Nietzsche)*

Nietzsche has launched a devastating critique of this secularized culture of benevolence. He in a sense restores the Christian notion of man inherently selfish and sinful but at the same time denies the possibility of grace. In Nietzsche's view man has to bestow grace upon himself. No transcendent sources are needed. And very tellingly: in a Nietzschean moral universe the care for the poor has no place at all any longer. An 'Umwertung aller Werte' has taken place.

7. *Further perspectives*

For the other characteristics of the 'moral framework' that supports the emergence of a civil society that I have pointed out one can make similar observations. For the various characteristics of the civil society ethos that I have pointed out it is possible to go into specific events and experiences, often religious in character, that brought them about (somehow in a way Gellner does). I can't go into this at this stage in any detail. A few hints must suffice to show that 'civil society' as I have delineated it is indeed a quite contextual notion (although the actual 'degree' of contextuality for its components may vary quite substantially).

³² Heinz Harbach, *Altruismus und Moral*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1992, p. 48ff.

³³ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1952, p.

- a. The might-right distinction: this is to be traced back to what Karl Jaspers has called the Axial Age (and here the 'context' is very broad!). Eric Voegelin has argued that specific experiences of transcendence were at the basis of this distinction. And Shmuel Eisenstadt in turn has shown that the societal dynamics in axial and non-axial societies has been quite different.
- b. Ethos of responsibility-in-a-free-world. Within the Judeo-Christian experience all the preconditions for the articulation of this ethos are there. The world is not divine, but is God creation, man is steward etc. Yet, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Charles Taylor have in very different ways argued that it has been the Reformation that unleashed this potential more fully than before.
- c. The universality of mankind: Alasdair MacIntyre, John Rist and again Eric Voegelin have argued that it was Christianity - and not the Stoa as is often said - that brought the awareness in the world that all men are equally worthy in the eyes of God. The barriers of race and gender were taken down in the Christian church. It became the first really multicultural and multi-class community in world history.

The groundwork for a real dialogue between civilizations around the issue of what makes a civil society possible has yet to be done. It will not help to either simply declare it a Western, or even a Protestant heritage with no intercultural relevance whatsoever (say the Huntington strategy) nor to ignore the issue of the 'inspirational sources' and their unique contextuality in a simplistic effort to spread the idea of civil society all over the world even in areas where the existential preconditions for its build-up and sustenance are not yet present. So a real and in depth dialogue is needed between and within different traditions in order to uncover and recover inspirational sources that within a certain context can support civil society-type notions. For example: what are in India, in a Hindu-context the stories, the symbols and the convictions and intuitions that support the idea of caring-for-others? What are the symbols, stories etc. that support some notion of personal or small group responsibility for the betterment of one's society? Etc. etc. I have the feeling that this type of dialogue has hardly begun.

CapeTown, July 10th 2002

Amsterdam, January 28th, 2003 (rev.)