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Civil Society

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For the past few decades, the term "civil society" has often referred to the voluntary associations that are distinguishable from the government and the marketplace or to a "public sphere" in which debates about the general good take place; thus it is seen as a *part* of society (rather than family or tribe), one that is thought by many to nurture through civic engagement the "social capital" central to a healthy society (Edwards 2004: 5-10; Putnam 2000). The term is also used to refer to a *type* of society, one that engages diversity and disagreement in a civilized way that respects pluralism (Edwards 2004:10; Langerak 2012). Historically, from Plato and Aristotle through Hobbes and Locke, the category of civil society included the state and government with its coercive powers. It was de Tocqueville who, impressed by the tendency of Americans to join associations of all types, drew attention to these intermediary voluntary groups as an important social force distinct from that of the state (de Tocqueville [1835]:). Lately the United Nations and many other organizations see this part of society as deserving of international aid and as capable of nurturing the sort of national ethos that respects diversity and pluralism. Whether civil society is understood to include the state, as it did for much of human history, or as including only non-governmental arenas, or as a society that respects pluralism, the relationship of theism to civil society raises a number of issues.

For early theism, whether in a polytheistic mode such as the Greek city states or in a henotheistic or monotheistic mode such as the Israelites of the Hebrew scriptures, there tended to be no separation or even distinction between religion and social or political structures. As the trial and death of Socrates showed, the details of one's theism were a political and legal issue for the Greeks. For the Hebrews, the role of prophet regularly involved overlap, sometimes integration, and often tension with those of judge, priest, or king. Such integration of the religious, civic, and political aspects of society remains the ideal of a minority of Jews and Christians and probably the majority of Muslims in today's world. Islam, for example, combines its monotheism with a vision of *sharia* or religious law that does not distinguish religious duties from moral or legal ones, though this vision becomes more complicated and qualified in religiously pluralistic societies in which Islam is one religion among others. Sometimes, as in India, Muslims are granted the privilege that the Muslim Ottoman Empire granted to its religious minorities, namely the right to apply their own religious law in family matters (marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.), while the same criminal law applies to all religions.

Christianity was an often-persecuted religion for its first few centuries, so its scriptures and early writings called for a distinction between what is owed to God and what owed to Caesar (Jesus, Matthew 22:21, Mark 12:17, Luke 20:25). Even St Paul's insistence that non-Christian government is God-appointed (Romans 13:1) was combined with his insistence that Christians not be conformed to this world (Romans 12:2). St Augustine interpreted these and similar passages as teaching that Christians live in two cities: an earthly city motivated by self-love and pride and a heavenly city motivated by

love for God; Christians are *peregrini* or "resident aliens," (or pilgrims, foreigners) whose real citizenship is the City of God (Augustine, XVIII.1). Resident aliens can appreciate the city in which they dwell, uphold its laws and pay its taxes, all of which Augustine recommended, but they cannot run for political office, which is why later Augustinians, such as Luther and Calvin, can be described as advocating "dual citizenship" in two kingdoms. Just as St Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship while insisting on the overriding importance of his heavenly calling, the reformers claimed that work in the world was an divinely ordained vocation even if it was subordinate to one's eternal salvation (Luther 1962 [1523]; Calvin). They contrasted their dual citizenship approach to the medieval distinction between the calling or the true vocation of the monastic life (a version of Augustine's resident alien) and the more mundane life of ordinary believers. Of course, there was debate about the relationship between the two citizenships, which was part of the wider debate throughout Christian history about the relationship between one's religious convictions and the civic and political culture of one's world. The most often-cited overview of this wider debate is H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, in which he describes five broad views: Christ Against Culture (emphasis on conflict with and rejection of worldly culture); The Christ of Culture (accommodation of religion to worldly culture); Christ Above Culture (synthesis of worldly culture with the higher calling of the gospel); Christ and Culture in Paradox (Luther's two kingdoms doctrine); and Christ the Transformer of Culture (neo-Calvinist integration of religious convictions with cultural, civic, and political endeavors). Analogies to most of these categories can be found in non-Christian theisms, but I will focus on three issues within the Christian tradition since the reformation and the

enlightenment, debates about theism and civic life that occur within and across most of the views outlined by Niebuhr. These issues arise when monotheism finds itself in a pluralistic civic society.

Respect for Error

What attitude should monotheists, those who accept a particular revelation as the truth, take toward views that contradict their own? The contradiction could be from agnostics or atheists or from theists whose vision of the good or version of the truth contradicts one's own. One answer is that the view of the other must be blinded by sin or ignorance or some serious cognitive error; in any case it cannot be reasonable or defensible. Stuart Hampshire famously attributed this negative attitude toward all monotheists:

> Those who accept the thesis of monotheism will believe that all mankind is subject to the same moral constraints, and that only one conception of the good is finally acceptable. Even if it does not become a positive duty to proselytize, as Christian missionaries do, and to act politically in support of the one authoritative conception of the good, such believers cannot consistently accept than many different conceptions of the good are, or in principle may be, defensible (Hampshire 2000: 51-52).

Hampshire's claim might be supported by all those church councils that pronounced on rather detailed and controversial theological views and then announced that anyone not accepting them is *anathama*. One might object that today many monotheists are either *inclusivists* or *pluralists*, the former believing that truth can be found in other religions

and the latter believing that different religions are different paths to the same good. But Hampshire could reply that most monotheists are *particularists* (or *exclusivists*), believing that there is only one path to salvation (sometimes called soteriological exclusivism) and that contradictory views are wrong (doctrinal exclusivism).

There is little doubt that sometimes particularism has expressed itself with the sort of spiritual and intellectual arrogance that demonizes everyone who disagrees. But there is no reason in principle why it could not be expressed with spiritual and intellectual humility. Even missionaries could agree that contradictory views are reasonable and morally fruitful although, as exclusivists, they see them as false (Ardeny 1995: 184-91). There is no reason why exclusivist could not accept John Rawls's "burdens of judgment" (Rawls 1996: 54-58), which consists of a number of common sources of disagreement between reasonable people (such as complexity of issues, imprecision of concepts, different ranking of agreed on values, and different ways of life). One can admit, as does Rawls, that sometimes "prejudice and bias, self- and group interest, blindness and willfulness" (Rawls 1996: 58) play a role in disagreements, and, beyond that, one can believe that corruption and sin often have bad cognitive effects on human reasoning and still believe that people can contradict each other on all sorts of issue while both sides have defensible and justifiable positions.

It is true that most monotheists, especially exclusivists, are not relativists about truth; when there is a contradiction they will believe that at least one side is wrong. But they can reject relativism of truth while accepting relativism of justification. The earth has always circled the sun, but there was a time and place when it was reasonable to think otherwise. Slavery has always been wrong, but there was a time and place when at least

some forms of it were rationally defensible. This is because of what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls *situated rationality*:

> Rationality is always situational, in the sense that what is rational for one person to believe will not be rational for another to believe. Thus in general we cannot inquire into the rationality of some belief by asking whether one would be rational in holding that belief. We must ask whether it would be rational for this particular person to hold it, of whether it would be rational for a person of this type in this situation to hold it (Wolterstorff 1983: 65).

So, *pace* Hampshire, a monotheist can grant that a contrary view of the good is defensible, even if wrong. Depending on the situation, error can be respected as reasonably justified, as in the common parlance, "I think you are wrong but you are defending a position I respect."

Strictly speaking, it is not so much the *content* of the belief that one is respecting as it is the believing—the way the believer arrives at, holds, or defends the belief. The content of a belief may be quite acceptable, but if it is believed by reading tealeaves, we do not have a reasonable believing. So respect for another's position or believing is a type of what Stephen Darwall calls "appraisal respect" for merit, as opposed to the "recognition respect" that, for example, we owe persons by virtue of their moral status (Darwall 1977). That monotheists base the moral and religious status of persons on their being created in God's image or on God's relationship with them has implications for how they treat those in error quite apart from whether they respect the others' positions.

Toleration

The criteria for whether we respect another's position are largely the sort of intellectual criteria we use for theory selection and for evaluation of claims—internal coherence, consistency with well-established beliefs, clarity, and so on—but whether or not we respect another's view as reasonable, we still have the moral question of whether to tolerate actions or practices generated by the beliefs we think are wrong. So the criteria for whether to tolerate behavior involve the morally relevant features and consequences of using or refraining from using whatever coercive measures are needed to stop the behavior. Thus one may decide to tolerate a behavior based on a believing one does not respect, as with political talk or demonstrations one finds obnoxious, and to be intolerant of behavior based on a believing one does respect, as when a religiously devout physician, who appreciates using the Bible to guide behavior, obtains a court order to override Jehovah's Witness parents' effort to shield their infant from a medically necessary blood transfusion. In both cases one weighs the relevant moral considerations and makes an all-things-considered judgment, sometimes reluctantly.

In its root meaning, toleration is the enduring of something disagreeable; it is not indifference toward matters one does not care about, and it is not broad-minded celebration of differences. Since it involves the decision not to use coercion, it is not merely resignation to the inevitable, although it can be granted reluctantly when one decides that coercion, while possible, would come at too high a cost. In a civil society intoleration is often indirect; rather than personally confronting reckless drivers or tax evaders one votes for laws that call for enforcement agencies to do so. Also, in a civil society, whether to tolerate or not generally applies to *acting* on beliefs (including,

sometimes, expressing them) rather than to the holding of them or to the persons holding them.

It is no accident that one of the earliest and most cited defenses of toleration, John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1983 [1689]), concerned religious toleration, since religion was the subject on which conflicting disagreeable opinions were most deeply felt. Here is the usually accepted story of the debate over religious toleration. When humans thought that the gods were local and that the gods' concerns were provincial, we could worship our gods while allowing and encouraging others to worship their gods. Polytheism was quite compatible with religious toleration or, at least, indifference to what others worshiped. (Of course, religious differences could still pump up the intensity with which cities and states fought over economic and political issues.) When the Jews thought their god was the most powerful—and jealous—among the gods, they did not expect or even desire others to agree. Even when the most powerful god was revealed as the One Creator God, giving this monotheism universal implications, God's call was directed toward a chosen people. Although priests and prophets debated whether the call was to a *most-favored* nation or to one with *added responsibilities*, the call did not always require intolerance toward other religions (though, again, theology could pump up the intensity of territorial disputes). However, when God revealed to Christianity and Islam a universal doctrine of exclusive salvation, mandating them to make disciples of all the nations, unbelief and apostasy took on new and troubling meaning, especially when theological concerns were linked to the coercive power of the state. The question about toleration became one of why we should let pernicious error create confusion and disorder and lead the gullible to perdition. Both justice and

compassion required us to consider the eternal destiny of those in the wrong or, at least, the souls of those who might get corrupted if we maintained a *laissez faire* attitude toward religious error. Given the above assumptions, once monotheism became not just universalistic but also expansionistic and exclusivistic, the argument for the Inquisition was seen as both pious and reasonable.