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Christianity and Civil Society

MICHAEL BANNER

IN ITS CONTEMPORARY USAGE the term *civil society* typically refers to the totality of structured associations, relationships, and forms of cooperation between persons that exist in the realm between the family and the state. Where such patterns of association, cooperation, and structured relationships are thought to be weak or inconsequential, as in the corporatist East of yesteryear (where individuals are said to have related chiefly to the State) or as in the capitalist and individualistic West (where personal relationships may arguably occur only within the family, and perhaps not even there), it has become commonplace to lament the nonexistence of civil society. Christianity, it is usually supposed, will be prominent among the mourners on whichever side of the globe the wake is observed.

I shall suggest in this chapter, however, that the relationship of Christian thought to the question of civil society is a matter of some complexity. This complexity is not a matter of the simple muddle that occurs where the ambiguities of the term *civil society* are not recognized and addressed, but has to do with the history and variety of Christian social thought. Obviously enough, the tradition of Christian thought about society and community predates questions concerning the existence, character, and qualities of civil society, without thereby having nothing to say in answer to them. Thus, though one might, in delineating a Christian conception of civil society, chart only the reactions of Christian thought to the rise of civil society under the patronage of modern liberalism, the intellectual roots of any such reactions would not necessarily emerge clearly into view, and thus the reactions might seem somewhat thinner than they really is. Such an approach might also conceal the stimulus that Christianity itself gave to the emergence of civil society in its modern form. The tradition of Christian social thought is, however, not just lengthy but also varied. Even if its different strands possess, naturally, a certain family resemblance, it is not monolithic. There is, then, nothing that can be identified as the Christian answer to the question of civil society. Rather, there is a tradition of social thought that, in its different versions, is relevant to the questions posed by

the modern debate about the existence, character, and qualities of civil society.

In the light of these considerations, this chapter approaches the task of answering some of these questions by attempting to outline particular and important moments in this tradition, taking as a point of departure Augustine's understanding of the two cities, which, as I shall point out, is questioned in different ways by Thomas and Calvin, and reconceived by Luther. In turn, the Lutheran reconception of the Augustinian approach is, it will be noted, criticized in the work of such figures as Bonhoeffer and Barth, while the Thomist tradition is developed in the social teaching of the Roman Magisterium. Attention will be drawn to the implications of these different approaches for contemporary questions regarding civil society, though the survey can, at best, be illustrative and not exhaustive.

Ingredients

The question "Who or what does civil society include?" has been posed from within the Christian tradition as a question, in effect, about where and in what form society is instantiated. And one influential answer from within the Christian tradition to that question is, in brief, "the church," since outside that community, social relations, public or private in modern terms, lack characteristics or qualities essential to them. Though this Augustinian answer was highly influential, it was in turn, however, as we must presently indicate, contested or reconceived, giving rise to different answers, or at least different emphases, in Christian thinking about the nature of human community.

Crucial to the thought of the New Testament in general, and the thought of Paul in particular, is the contrast underlying Paul's exhortation to the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."¹ The character and significance of this contrast must, however, be properly understood. Wolin gets it right when, having cited this verse, he comments:

This attitude must not be understood as mere alienation or the expression of an unfulfilled need to belong. Nor is it to be accounted for in terms of the stark contrasts that Christians drew between eternal and temporal goods, between the life of the spirit held out by the Gospel and the life of the flesh symbolized by political and social relationships. What is fundamental to an understanding of the entire range of [early] Christian political attitudes was that they issued from a group that regarded itself as already in a society, one of far greater purity and higher purpose: "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people."²

Wolin is also right to observe of a much-used and misused text that “the critical significance of the Pauline teaching [in Rom. 13] was that it brought the political order within the divine economy and thereby compelled its confrontation by Christians.”³

Given such roots, it is hardly surprising that a dominant strand in the Christian tradition has thought about society by means of a contrast between two kingdoms, realms, or—as in the locus classicus of Christian social thought, Augustine’s *City of God*—between two cities. According to Augustine,

although there are many great peoples throughout the world, living under different customs in religion and morality and distinguished by a complex variety of languages, arms and dress, it is still true that there have come into being only two main divisions, as we may call them, in human society: and we are justified in following the lead of our Scriptures and calling them two cities.⁴

What is here characterized as a division *within* society is for Augustine in another sense, however, a division *between* societies, only one of which properly deserves the name. That this is a division between societies is the force of the use of the word *city* to mark the two divisions, since, employed where in Greek one might read *polis*, the word serves to indicate all-encompassing communities. The two cities, that is to say—the city of God (sometimes the heavenly city) and the earthly city—are to be understood as two polities, “two political entities co-existent in one space and time,” “distinct social entities, each with its principle . . . and each with its political expression, Roman empire and church.”⁵ But these distinct “social entities,” in virtue of their different origins, histories, and ends, are to be contrasted more starkly still; for if we quibbled with the notion that the division between the two cities was one within society, and noted that it is actually a division between societies, we must also reckon with the fact that one of these is for Augustine the form, here on earth, of the one true society, whereas the other is a society only in a superficial sense. How so?

“The two cities,” says Augustine, “were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self.”⁶ Now the difference in ends or objects of love creates two quite different cities: “The citizens of each of these [two cities] desire their own kind of peace, and when they achieve their aim, this is the peace in which they live.”⁷ The heavenly city, united in love of God, enjoys a peace that “is a perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God and mutual fellowship in God.”⁸ The earthly city also desires peace, but its peace is of a different kind.

The citizens of the earthly city, in a prideful love of self over love of God, have each rejected the rule of God and chosen in preference a self-rule as intolerant of any other rule as it is of God's; for "pride is a perverted imitation of God . . . [that] hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in place of God's rule. This means that it hates the just peace of God, and loves its own peace of injustice."⁹ The love of self becomes, then, that *libido dominandi*, or lust for domination, that has driven the Roman Empire. Peace is achieved through the imposition of one's own will by the exercise of force, and is at once costly in its creation,¹⁰ unjust in its character,¹¹ and unstable in its existence.¹² This is not to say that there is no difference between the Roman Empire and a band of brigands, to refer to Augustine's infamous jibe,¹³ but it is to say that the peace of all other societies is different in kind from the just and certain peace of the true society found in the city of God, represented here on earth in the church, which is the city of God "on pilgrimage."¹⁴

The implications of Augustine's thought for the question of where, and in what form, society is instantiated are brought out in Joan Lockwood O'Donovan's summary of his argument:

Augustine's polarising of the two cities . . . radically questioned the sense in which the social relations belonging to the *sacculum*, the passing order of the world, could be thought to comprise a society, a unity in plurality or harmonised totality. For on his view the secular *res publica* is not a true community knit together by charity and consensus in right—that is present only where faith in Christ and obedience to His law of love bind persons together—but a fragile and shifting convergence of human wills with respect to limited categories of earthly goods in a sea of moral disorder, of personal and group hostilities.¹⁵

Society, properly so called, exists in the city of God, and not in the earthly city. And so too civil society—for if the grounds for a stable structure of association and cooperation are certainly lacking for the whole, they are finally lacking for simple human associations as such.

The claim that society, properly understood, exists in the church is lost, however, if the theme of the "two cities" as Augustine develops it is transposed by an interpretation of the two cities as two spheres, a move associated with Lutheranism (if not quite so certainly with Luther).¹⁶ Such a move dissolves the tension between the differently characterized cities by construing their relationship in terms of a functional division concerning, say, the worldly and the spiritual, or outer and inner. With the imagery thus construed, it becomes possible for the church to understand itself as an instance of civil society, rather than as its locus. But this is just what is prohibited in Augustine's thought, in

which the two cities are not related spatially, to use Bonhoeffer's term,¹⁷ but temporally or eschatologically; that is to say, the cities do not rule *over* different *spheres*, but rather, ruling over the same spheres, rule *in* different, albeit overlapping, *times*.¹⁸ Just because of this overlap, the city of God must seek its distinctive peace amid the earthly peace and will make use of it as it makes use of earthly things in general (and thus has grounds for distinguishing between the different forms of the earthly city insofar as they do or do not prove useful to its purpose). But this overlap does not license the granting of autonomy, if one may put it so, to the earthly city. Coming at the point from the other side, one can agree with Markus when he observes that according to the Augustinian picture, "there was no need for Christians to be set apart sociologically, as a community separated from the 'world,' . . . uncontaminated by it and visibly 'over against the world.' On the contrary: the Christian community was, quite simply, the world redeemed and reconciled."¹⁹ Monasticism (at least in its distinctly Augustinian theory in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, if not in its later, less-Augustinian practice) maintains this insight, presupposing not an autonomy of spheres (and thus, in our terms, that there are versions of society), but rather that the monastery, which was first of all a lay movement, displays the secular (i.e., temporal) form of society, of which the earthly city is but a sorry caricature.

If Luther subtly reconceives the Augustinian picture, Thomas and Calvin offer more straightforward challenges to it, while Orthodoxy developed independent of it, though struggling with essentially the same issues and problems. Although Augustine was writing at a time when Christianity had become the official and favored religion of the Empire, it was chiefly in Byzantium that the "conversion of the state" led to a radical questioning of the contrast between civil church and uncivil society, to put it in modern terms, that belongs to early Christian thought. This conversion did not unsettle Augustine's picture: the earthly city had not become the city of God "merely because the kings serve it [i.e., the church], wherein lies greater and more perilous temptations."²⁰ In the East this sense of danger or tension was not always maintained, even if the charge of "caesaropapism" (i.e., the subordination of the church to political rule) risks ignoring some of the subtleties involved, or at least the predominantly pragmatic character of the handling of these issues. It does, however, indicate the danger to which Orthodoxy has seemed especially prone, at least to Western eyes; that is, of having a "charismatic understanding of the state" that "lacked political realism,"²¹ and that thus too readily assumed the possibility of Christian society outside the immediate life of the church. Arguably Eastern monasticism, like its Western counterpart, preserved a rather different perspective.²²

In the West, “the alternative theological answers . . . to the Augustinian problematic of secular society are,” to cite Joan Lockwood O’Donovan again, “the Thomistic-Aristotelian rejection of it and the Calvinist-Puritan conversion of it.”²³ She continues:

Under Aristotelian influence St. Thomas exchanged the Augustinian conception of a conflictual and disjunctive social order for a more organically harmonious one. His minimising of the spiritual distance between the traditionally “pre-lapsarian” institutions such as marriage and family and the post-lapsarian institutions such as private property and political rule enabled him to weave social life into a unified moral texture. He viewed sinful society as retaining the inherent harmony of a hierarchy of natural ends and functions, each part having its appointed place within the teleological whole. With no disjunctive division between different communities, especially between political and non-political communities, all together constituted a real social totality, a common will directed toward a common good.

For Calvin the handling of Augustine was different:

Unlike St. Thomas, Calvin’s response to the Augustinian problematic of secular society was a reorientation rather than a displacement of it. For Calvin the disorder of sinful social relations could not be mitigated by an appeal to a natural social teleology, but required a different conception of order: a more exclusively political/juridical one based immediately on God’s providential rule over sinful humanity and elaborated in the (largely Old Testament) ideas of divine-human covenant, divine commandment and divinely established offices. The unity of civil as well as of ecclesiastical society depended on their institutional structuring by God’s commandments that defined the rights and duties of every social “office” as a vehicle of His revealed law in the creation and redemption of the world.

Society

According to the tradition that flows from Augustine, then, civil society as genuine society—that is, even minimally, as a stable structure of association and cooperation between persons—exists in the city of God, or in the church that is, here and now, its imperfect token. In contrast with this society, all other associations are radically defective. But what makes the church, or the city of God, itself a society and not a simple aggregate?

It might be supposed that this is not a problem, or not a very severe problem, within the Augustinian framework, simply because in identifying the church as society we avoid the issue that must arise for those who think of society as variously realized and manifested and thus as

having parts. This supposition would, however, be mistaken for two reasons. In the first place, even of the church it can be asked what unites its members. Furthermore, and in the second place, in stressing that talk of “two cities” does not presuppose a division of spheres—that is, to repeat Markus’s formulation of Augustine’s viewpoint, that “the Christian community was, quite simply, the world redeemed and reconciled”—attention is drawn to the fact that the life of the church might be expected itself to be differentiated, since it will comprise more than those functions that might be attributed to a church by a contemporary sociologist. Thus Bonhoeffer, for example, to be regarded as a modern exponent of this tradition, thinks of the Christian life as structured according to “divine mandates,” including labor (or culture), marriage, and government, and the first of these may involve patterns and instances of association and cooperation that will raise a question as to the coordination or unity of what is in another sense a single society.

In his dispute with the Donatists, Augustine came to stress order, sacraments, and doctrine, and most importantly baptism, as what renders real within the church the rule of Christ, and thus unites the church as one body. This rule of Christ within the life of the church in, or rather as, the world brings unity to this differentiated society as each of its members uses everything for the sake of a higher end, namely, God.

For the Thomist tradition, which thinks of society as existing outside the church in virtue of the claims made upon human life by its natural ends, it is the common good that serves to unite its parts. The classical organic image of society thus maintains its naturalistic quality, with a special emphasis, however, on the need for the head to identify the common good and coordinate its pursuit.²⁴ The sense in which the unity of society is an achievement is heightened in Calvin’s conception. Order for Calvin, as Wolin points out, “required a constant exercise of power,”²⁵ though here the instrument of its realization is not a single head, but a wider structure of institutions and offices. This structuring of Christian society, giving participation a more crucial role than any direct and individual rule, whether in matters civil or more narrowly ecclesiastical, was to have significant consequences for the growth and development of civil society in the particular sense in which that term is now most often used. It was in the Calvinist congregations of New England that there developed a practice of association, cooperation, and self-government that was determined to protect the social space thus revealed, occupied, and mapped out against encroachment by the state. This space is, of course, the space of civil society as it is classically conceived, and its imagining has roots, as we shall have cause to note again, in Reformation thought and perhaps even further back in the Christian tradition.

Values

Though Thomas and Augustine may have looked for society in different places, and expected it to be sustained in different ways, there was no difference between them in believing that the good or value of such society (within the church in Augustine's account, or outside it in Thomas's) lies precisely in its sociality, since it is in sociality that the human good is realized.

Augustine had been tempted to represent the good life as a neo-Platonic quest with contemplation at its core. As he distanced himself from these philosophic roots, however, he came to stress the thoroughly social character of human life. Thus, though the earthly city is contrasted with the city of God, the contrast is not between the sociality of one and the asociality of the other, but rather between the doubtful sociality of one and the true sociality of the other, a sociality with a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension. The heavenly city, we will recall, united in love of God, enjoys a peace that "is a perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God and *mutual fellowship in God*."

Thomas's grounding in Aristotle required a move in the other direction, so to speak: not in explicit recognition of the value of society, but rather a modest qualification of the assumption in its favor. (Thus in his commentary on the *Politics*, in glossing Aristotle's reflection on the "monstrous," we might say "inhuman," condition of those deprived of society and isolated from political life, Thomas, as D'Entrèves puts it, "finds it necessary to make an express reservation with regard to asceticism, in favour of the idea of a higher degree of perfection to be attained by retiring from the world rather than by participating in it. But he is at pains to emphasize the exceptional character of a life of this kind, and the necessity, for the attainment of such an ideal, of more than human capacities."²⁶) But however that may be, the essential agreement between Thomas and Augustine is evidenced in the former employing the latter's argument in justifying or explaining the prohibition of incest. According to Thomas, an end of marriage is "the binding together of mankind and the extension of friendship: for a husband regards his wife's kindred as his own. Hence it would be prejudicial to this extension of friendship if a man could take a woman of his kindred to wife since no new friendship would accrue to anyone from such a marriage. Wherefore, according to human law and the ordinances of the Church, several degrees of consanguinity are debarred from marriage."²⁷ Here he simply repeats the reasoning of Augustine when he explains why, apart from in the first generations, men were forbidden to take their sisters as wives: "The aim was that one man should not combine many

relationships in his one self, but that those connections should be separated and spread among individuals, and that in this way they should help to bind social life more effectively by involving in their plurality a plurality of persons.”²⁸ (What is striking here is that the freedom of marriage, which the church vigorously maintained in other ways, gives way before the good of the extension of sociality.)

The good of sociality is, then, a presupposition of both these streams of thought within the Christian tradition. And, according to Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*, it is the fact that this is a good that explains the existence of civil society in the modern sense, as well as in its older sense: “Just as man is led by [a] natural propensity to associate with others in a political society, so also he finds it advantageous to join with his fellows in other kinds of societies, which though small and not independent are nonetheless true societies.”²⁹ Thus “the natural sociability of men” is held to be the principle from which both the state and private associations are born and the good that they serve, and this prior grounding of both determines the relationship between them: “It is by virtue of the law of nature that men may enter into private societies and it is for the defence of that law, not its destruction, that the state comes into being.”³⁰

In the Thomist tradition, however, this “natural propensity” to association in society and societies has been understood as more than a tendency to mere association. Rather, it is a tendency to association in societies that presuppose and foster that community of purpose, interest, and sympathy that is expressed by the notion of solidarity. It is on the basis of such anthropological presuppositions that modern Roman Catholic social thought from *Rerum Novarum* on (through, for example, Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* and down to John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens*) has offered a critique of liberalism and socialism that both, though in different ways, deny the naturalness of human solidarity. Free-market liberalism is thought to conceive of humanity as made up of competitive individuals lacking a common good distinct from the aggregate of individual preferences. Socialism seems no less to doubt the naturalness of social solidarity, albeit that the conflictual character of society is a matter of class, rather than individual, interests and is, furthermore, not intrinsic, but is historically conditioned and contingent.

The recent *Catechism* of the Roman Catholic church extends this analysis somewhat by finding what we might think of as a hierarchy of values in society, each serving the human good. In the first place the *Catechism* offers what seems like a pragmatic reason for “socialization” (meaning here “the creation of voluntary associations and institutions . . . ‘on both national and international levels, which relate to economic and social goals, to cultural and recreational activities, to sport, to various

professions, and to political affairs' "³¹), namely, that it "expresses the natural tendency for human beings to associate with one another for the sake of attaining objectives that exceed individual capacities."³² In the second place, however, in mentioning again humankind's natural sociability and thus entertaining the thought that human society is an end in itself, it goes on to connect "socialization" with a further good:

The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation.³³

Elsewhere it is said that the "vocation of man" is "made up of divine charity and human solidarity,"³⁴ just because "the human person is . . . ordered to God" as well as to others.³⁵ The *Catechism* notes in addition, however, that "[a]ll men are called to the same end: God himself" and that "there is a certain resemblance between the union of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are to establish among themselves in truth and love."³⁶

The further good that might be found in human society in virtue of this "resemblance" has been more central to Protestant thought that, if it affirms the "natural sociability" of human kind, does so not on the basis of supposed knowledge of the natural law, but more definitely on the basis of a theological anthropology. For Karl Barth, for example, that "the humanity of man consists in the determination of his being as a being with the other" is a counterpart of the prior fact of humankind's calling to be the covenant-partner of God.³⁷ Thus here the value that might be attributed to civil society is found not only in its satisfying human sociability or solidarity as such, but in the fact of this human sociability and solidarity being a likeness of, and a preparation for, the sociability and solidarity of the life of God, into which humans are called. The value of civil society is for this tradition, then, firmly eschatological, so we might say.

Risks

In recent Roman Catholic teaching the risks associated with civil society are the risks associated with society itself, namely, that higher levels of association will tend to deprive lower levels of association and individuals of their proper responsibilities. According to Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*:

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is

an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.³⁸

This wrong is to be prevented by respect for the principle of subsidiarity (a term first employed in Pius's encyclical, though plainly the idea is much older). This principle, which functions as a balance to the emphasis on the common good that had been central to *Rerum Novarum*, states that

a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.³⁹

The *Catechism* offers a theological rationale for this principle, which protects civil society against the state, but also individuals against civil society:

God has not willed to reserve to himself all exercise of power. He entrusts to every creature the functions it is capable of performing, according to the capacities of its own nature. This mode of governance ought to be followed in social life. The way God acts in governing the world, which bears witness to such great regard for human freedom, should inspire the wisdom of those who govern human communities. They should behave as ministers of divine providence.⁴⁰

Thus behaving, those with authority will acknowledge the existence of lower authorities and the rights of the individual, a theme that has been increasingly important in Roman Catholic social thought of the last fifty years and that features prominently in the *Catechism*, even though there is some evidence (in *Evangelium Vitae*, for example) of a growing sense of the need to bring some order and discipline to a mode of discourse that has given us rights to abortion, to die, and so on.

The Augustinian tradition, as we have seen, was suspicious of the exercise of power because of the fundamental corruption of the human will. Societies and associations, at whatever level, may provide occasions for domination and oppression. (Liberation theology is, in a sense, an heir to this tradition and has sought to supplement and strengthen it by learning from the Marxist critique of society and civil society. The complaint against it from some of its critics, however, has been that it has not related what it has learned from Marx to the major themes of Christian doctrine, but rather has allowed the latter to be

replaced by, or wholly subordinated to, other categories and concepts.) The Augustinian tradition has addressed and characterized the risks that societies pose, however, not by the formulation of an abstract principle, such as the principle of subsidiarity, nor necessarily by an elaboration of an account of human rights. Apart from anything else, to have taken this route might appear to treat the two brackets, so to speak, of the modern discussion of civil society (namely, the state and the individual in his or her privacy) as themselves autonomous and beyond criticism, when against the command of God they can possess no such autonomy. The command of God is in principle, in a manner of speaking, totalitarian, as the monastic rules we have already referred to presuppose in opening the whole of the life of ruled (monks) and ruler (abbot) to the Rule.

If, however, there is a suspicion of the principle of subsidiarity and rights, it is plain enough that the totalitarian character of the rule of God itself provides a basis for a critique of all social institutions and associations, a point that was formulated with a certain clarity and force in the *Barmen Declaration* of 1934. This document can be seen as a protest at the tendency of Lutheranism, having converted Augustine's two cities into two spheres, to accord a certain independence to the state and civil society as concerned with the outer and not the inner life, which is the concern of the church. In Luther's most important treatment of this matter, the distinction is used to "safeguard religion against the unwelcome attentions of ungodly princes,"⁴¹ and thus (by the way and to mention another occasion when Christian thought is found at the origins of civil society) provides arguments that would later be taken over almost *tout court* by advocates of religious toleration.⁴² But the distinction of spheres seemed also to deny to the church, in principle, the right to offer a critique of action in the public realm, even when that action involved, as here, the determination of the limits and character of society by myths of *Volk*, blood, and soil. Against such a distinction the *Barmen Declaration* asserts that "Jesus Christ is . . . God's vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life" and that "through him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world," and rejects "the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would belong not to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him."⁴³ As Torrance comments: "[T]o confess the Lordship of Christ over all areas of life (intellectual and cultural, ecclesial and civil) means that, in the light of the Gospel, we are unconditionally obliged to be true to and obedient to the One who is in his person God's Word to humankind. Culture, therefore, may neither determine the sphere of the Gospel

nor relativise its imperatives but, conversely, culture and society require to be perceived, interpreted and evaluated critically in the light of the Gospel."⁴⁴ (This point will be important in relation to the issue of freedom, treated below.)

If the Protestant tradition has had cause to recapture a sense of its critical responsibility toward society, civil or otherwise, the Roman tradition, which has perhaps never lost this sense, has had cause to consider whether its own hierarchies, structures, and government are themselves in need of critical examination in the light of the principles of subsidiarity and a proper respect for the individual that have been used to examine secular society. Since Vatican II, at least, there has been a wide recognition that if society and civil society pose certain risks to the individual, so too may certain understandings of the church and of its "Magisterium" (i.e., teaching office and authority).⁴⁵ The disputes within Roman Catholicism concerning the bearers of this authority and its scope point to the fact that the principle of subsidiarity is not so much a rule by which precise boundaries can be determined, as a general caution against interventions from above except as a last resort.

Responsibility

We have already seen how the principle of subsidiarity focuses the question as to who is to do what in civil society. According to this norm, responsibility is to remain at the lowest level from state to individual, provided that its remaining there is compatible with the common good. This serves, subject to interpretation and judgment, to attribute responsibilities to individuals, families, local communities and associations, and so on, to vindicate them in their different roles and, against certain understandings of its duties, to restrain the state. Of course the interpretation of this principle is a matter of contention, as we have noted, and no more so, perhaps, than in relation to the discussion of the market that stimulated the encyclicals that first brought the theme of subsidiarity to attention. While a libertarian approach is likely to think that responsibility for human well-being lies with the individual pursuing his or her interests in the marketplace, on certain interpretations of the principle of subsidiarity and on certain understandings of the common good, this responsibility does not lie at this level alone but is shared with others, including the state.

Within Protestant thought the question of responsibilities is handled in effect by means of a theme already mentioned, namely, that of the so-called mandates or orders of creation. Reflection on this theme is an

attempt to elaborate an ethic that takes seriously the fact, as Brunner puts it, that

[t]he world, that which is not "I," is not something material, needing to be shaped and moulded by us. To think it is betrays an impertinent, arrogant habit of mind springing from the delusion that man is a god. The world is not a shapeless mass of matter, it is not a chaos which we have to reduce to form and order. It was formed long ago: it is given to us in a rich variety of form. In its *form* the will of God is stamped upon that which exists. We ought to understand this existing shape or order as the expression of the Divine Will. . . . We are to range ourselves within this order.⁴⁶

According to Brunner, the order we are called to respect does not consist only in "our natural existence, but also . . . [in] our historical existence." Thus, when he claims that "[r]everence for the Creator, whose work, in spite of all human perversion, is the one existing reality, demands as our first reaction obedience to the existing order, and grateful acceptance of the goodness of the Creator in the orders, through which alone He makes it possible for us to serve our neighbour, and, indeed, to live at all,"⁴⁷ he means by the "orders" something more than the mere biological givens of human existence. He means, in fact, "those existing facts of human corporate life which lie at the root of all historical life as unalterable presuppositions, which, although their historical forms may vary, are unalterable in their fundamental structure, and, at the same time, relate and unite men to one another in a definite way."⁴⁸ Brunner names five such orders: the family, the state, culture, the church, and the economic order, and concludes that "the Command of God comes to us related to these orders of reality . . . [and] can be perceived in and through them."⁴⁹

Brunner's handling of this theme was the cause of considerable controversy; Barth (sharply and with some imprecision) and Bonhoeffer (sympathetically and with more care) took exception to it.⁵⁰ The details of this controversy need not trouble us, since what is important to note here is that in seeking to handle the theme better, Brunner's critics share the underlying conviction that provides the basis of his concern, namely, that the created order possesses a good that makes a moral demand on us and on our ordering of social life. This has the implication for Bonhoeffer that even if government is itself, or has, a mandate, "[i]t is not creative. It preserves what has already been created, maintaining it in the order which is assigned to it through the task which is imposed by God. It protects it by making law to consist in the acknowledgement of the divine mandates and by securing respect for this law by the force of the sword. Thus [for example] the governing authority is not the performer but the witness and guarantor of marriage."⁵¹

The seeming specificity of the principle of subsidiarity may be lacking, and the need to develop a fuller account of the parts of society and their relationship may be obvious, but what is also evident is that the Protestant treatment of the ethics of creation leads to a belief in a differentiated society, with various responsibilities lying with different forms of social life that extend from the individual to the state.

Freedom

Again, the principle of subsidiarity, which has already been stated, provides a way of approaching the question of the appropriate balance between individual autonomy and the organizations and associations of society. It is plain here, however, that the interpretation of its precise requirements is a matter of some difficulty, as is evident when the *Catechism* asserts that the “right to the exercise of freedom . . . must be recognised and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order.”⁵² What is equally plain is that the freedom which is here in question is a freedom within or under the moral law, and not the absolute freedom of those versions of liberalism that the affirmation of solidarity was meant to preclude. According to *Evangelium Vitae*:

When freedom, out of a desire to emancipate itself from all forms of tradition and authority, shuts out even the most obvious evidence of an objective and universal truth, which is the foundation of personal and social life, then the person ends up by no longer taking as the sole and indisputable point of reference for his own choices the truth about good and evil, but only his subjective and changeable opinion or, indeed, his selfish interest and whim. This view of freedom leads to a distortion of life in society. If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. Thus society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds.⁵³

It is this notion of freedom, according to the encyclical, that “exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, and gives no place to solidarity,” which lies at the root of “the contradiction between the solemn affirmation of human rights and their tragic denial in practice” in abortion and euthanasia.

For O’Donovan, the modern liberalism with which Christianity may need to contend has its beginning in the church’s assertion of what he terms “evangelical liberty,” “which is to say, the freedom freely to obey Christ.”⁵⁴ The assertion of this freedom could not but have consequences

for society: "The voice of a prophetic church in its midst, which speaks with divine authority, loosens the hold of existing authorities and evokes the prospect of liberty"⁵⁵—for here the freedom of the individual against certain authorities is a presupposition of the assertion of the existence of yet higher authorities to which these others must themselves submit. Thus,

[f]reedom . . . is not conceived primarily as an assertion of *individuality*, whether positively, in terms of individual creativity and impulse, or negatively, in terms of "rights," which is to say immunities from harm. It is a social reality, a new disposition of society around its supreme Lord which sets it loose from its traditional lords. Yet individual liberty is not far away. For the implication of this new social reality is that the individual can no longer simply be carried within the social setting to which she or he was born; for that setting is under challenge from the new social centre. This requires she give herself to the service of the Lord within the new society, in defiance, if need be, of the old lords and societies that claim her. She emerges in differentiation from her family, tribe and nation, making decisions of discipleship which were not given her from within them.⁵⁶

In the early period it was perhaps the practice of avowed virginity that was the most marked sign of this freedom of decision and differentiation against authorities for the sake of a yet higher authority. But in relation to all earthly societies, the exercise of freedom thus conceived remains vital to Christian self-understanding, just because the ordered and differentiated society of the city that God intends is not to be identified with the imperfect societies of other cities that recognize other authorities or none.

Further Reading

- Aquinas: Selected Political Writings*. Edited by A. P. D'Entrèves (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959).
- Augustine. *City of God*. Translated by H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), esp. bk. 19.
- Barmen Declaration*. Translated by D. S. Bax. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 47 (1984).
- D. Bonhoeffer. *Ethics*. Edited by E. Bethge, translated by N. H. Smith (London: SCM, 1955).
- Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Chapman, 1994).
- Martin Luther and John Calvin. *On Secular Authority*. Edited and translated by H. Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- The Rule of St. Benedict*. Translated by J. McCann (London: Sheed and Ward, 1976).

Notes

1. Rom. 12:2 (in the Revised Standard Version).
2. S. S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 99, citing I Pet. 2, 9.
3. *Ibid.* 98.
4. Augustine *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 14.1.
5. O. M. T. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83 and 203.
6. *Ibid.* 14.28.
7. *Ibid.* 14.1.
8. *Ibid.* 19.13.
9. *Ibid.* 19.12.
10. Of the imperial peace, Augustine exclaims (*City of God* 19.7): "Think of the cost of this achievement! Consider the scale of those wars with all that slaughter of human beings, all the human blood that was shed!"
11. The prime mark of this injustice is the existence of slavery. According to Augustine (*City of God* 19.15), the proper relationship between human beings is "prescribed by the order of nature, and it is in this situation that God created man. For he says, 'Let him have lordship over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky . . . and all the reptiles that crawl on the earth.' He did not wish the rational being, made in his own image, to have dominion over any but irrational creatures, not man over man, but man over beasts. Hence the first just men were set up as shepherds of flocks, rather than as kings of men."
12. In the midst of a melancholy review of the woes of life produced by division and conflict within house, city, world, and even within that "angelic fellowship" posited by "those philosophers" who insist that "the gods are our friends," Augustine notes (*City of God* 19.5) that the peace of the earthly city is "a doubtful good, since we do not know the hearts of those with whom we wish to maintain peace, and even if we could know them today, we should not know what they might be like tomorrow."
13. "Remove justice," writes Augustine (*City of God* 4.4), "and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? . . . For it was a witty and a truthful rejoinder which was given by a captured pirate to Alexander the Great. The king asked the fellow, 'What is your idea, in infesting this sea?' And the pirate answered, with uninhibited insolence, 'The same as yours, in infesting the earth! But because I do it with a tiny craft, I'm called a pirate: because you have a mighty navy, you're called an emperor.'"
14. Augustine *City of God* 15.21.
15. J. L. O'Donovan, "Société," in *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, ed. J-Y. Lacoste (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1998). For a fuller account and discussion of Augustine's argument, see O. M. T. O'Donovan, "Augustine's *City of God* XIX and Western Political Thought," *Dionysius* 40 (1987): 89–110.
16. For Luther's most important grappling with the issues, see *On Secular Authority*, ed. and trans. H. Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

17. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge, trans. N. H. Smith (London: SCM, 1995), 178: "God and the world are thus at one in Christ in a way which means that although the Church and the world are different from each other, yet there cannot be a static spatial borderline between them."

18. The city of God is a "city whose kingdom will be eternal" (*City of God* 15.8), whereas the earthly city persists only until the day "when all human lordship and power is annihilated and God is all in all" (*City of God* 19.15).

19. R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 167.

20. Cited in O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 197.

21. J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (Oxford: Mowbray's, 1975), 216.

22. See G. Florovsky, "Antinomies of Christian History: Empire and Desert," in his *Christianity and Culture* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1974), 67–100.

23. O'Donovan, "Société."

24. In, for example, "On Princely Government" (*De Regimine Principum*), having rehearsed arguments that demonstrate that "the fellowship of society" is "natural and necessary to man," Thomas continues: "It follows with equal necessity that there must be some principle of government within the society. For if a great number of people were to live, each intent upon his own interests, such a community would surely disintegrate unless there were one of its number to have a care for the common good: just as the body of a man or of any other animal would disintegrate were there not in the body itself a single and controlling force, sustaining the general vitality of all the members. As Solomon tells us (Prov xi, 14): 'Where there is no ruler the people shall be scattered.' This conclusion is quite reasonable; for the particular interest and the common good are not identical." See *Aquinas: Selected Political Writings*, ed. A. P. D'Entrèves (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), 3.

25. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 171.

26. D'Entrèves, *Aquinas: Selected Political Writings*, xvii; citing *Commentary on the Politics* 1.1: "If any man should be such that he is not a political being by nature, he is either wicked—as when this happens through the corruption of human nature—or he is better than man—in that he has a nature more perfect than that of other men in general, so that he is able to be sufficient to himself without the society of men, as were John the Baptist and St Anthony the hermit."

27. Aquinas, *Supplement to the Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates, 1920), 54.3.

28. Augustine *City of God* 15.16.

29. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, trans. Catholic Truth Society (London: CTS, 1983), par. 37.

30. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, par. 38.

31. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Chapman, 1994), para. 1882, citing *Mater et Magistra* 60.

32. *Ibid.*, para. 1882.

33. *Ibid.*, para. 1879.

34. *Ibid.*, para. 1699.

35. *Ibid.*, para. 1711.

36. *Ibid.*, para. 1878.
37. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, ed. G. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. H. Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1960), 243.
38. Cited in "Subsidiarity, Principle of," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. J. A. Dwyer and E. L. Montgomery (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994).
39. *Catechism*, para. 1183, citing *Centesimus Annus*.
40. *Catechism*, para. 1184.
41. H. Höpfl, editor's introduction to Luther, *On Secular Authority*, xiii.
42. *Ibid.*, xi.
43. *Barmen Declaration*, trans. D. S. Bax, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 47 (1984): 1.1.
44. A. J. Torrance, introductory essay to *Christ, Justice, and Peace*, by E. Jüngel (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1992), xii.
45. For a treatment of subsidiarity in relation to the teaching authority of the church and for further references, see J. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 169–74.
46. E. Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. O. Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1937), 124–25.
47. *Ibid.*, 214.
48. *Ibid.*, 210.
49. *Ibid.*, 93.
50. For Barth see especially "Nein" in E. Brunner and K. Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. P. Fraenkel (London: Centenary Press, 1946), 65–128; and for Bonhoeffer, see *Ethics*, especially the section entitled "The Last Things and the Things before the Last."
51. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 182.
52. *Catechism*, para. 1738.
53. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, English trans. (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1995), paras. 19 and 20.
54. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 255.
55. *Ibid.*, 252.
56. *Ibid.*, 254.