

Book Review

CHARLES PEMBERTON (ED.) (2017), *THEOLOGY AND CIVIL SOCIETY*, LONDON, UK: TAYLOR & FRANCIS. 206 PAGES. [ISBN: 978-1138630369]

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There is growing suspicion on the emancipatory potential that civil society could offer, held not only among politicians and businesspeople, but also the state and market-centric social scientists, both left and right. Claims that the current debate on civil society originated in the West as a direct product of the Enlightenment Project in the 17th and 18th centuries of western civilization is at best only half true. The rise of ethnonationalism and populism in many advanced democracies, particularly in the United States of America was seen as a result of civil society organisations' failure to take off in the country it first developed. Some issues, as observed by Pemberton, such as the Big Society project in Britain was seen as a failure and Theresa May's decision to dissolve the Office for Civil Society, and setting up the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was seen as a testimony to reject the emancipatory potential that civil society could offer.

The attack on the United States of America on 11 September 2001 and the London bombings on 7 July 2005 were used as a diversion to regulate and co-opt NGOs and social movements under the idea of waging a war against terror. The rising suspicion mentioned has diminished both the actual and potential social capital for strong and civilized societies, together with the actual and potential religious capital produced by religious associations and movements. The relationship between religion and civil society had always been debated by theologians of the past, long before the western Enlightenment Project. As argued by Charles Pemberton in his edited book, *Theology and Civil Society*, it remains a widely debated topic, citing many works (Stamatov, 2013; Storrar, Casarella and Metzger, 2011; Beaumont and Cloke, 2012; Juergensmeyer, Griego and Soboslai, 2015; Fergusson, 2004).

A three-day conference was held in March 2015 at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, with the theme 'Between Theology and the Political'. It was sponsored by the Lincoln Theological Institute, setting dialogues on the proliferating field and conceptual resources of political theology and current trends in religious and political activism. The book, *Theology and Civil Society* was a product of the conference, where thoughtful ideas from theorists, philosophers, social activists and parliamentarians were gathered. Contributors of the book, as asserted or rather assumed by Pemberton, guided by the teaching of the church, modeled what John Milbank said, which is that Christian theology is concerned with 'three ontologies of the impossible': God creating the world, sin and The Fall, and the Redemption. Hence, it is the duty of political rulers to promote the common good (or the common will) under the law of God.

Benefiting from the works of Arato and Cohen, and Michael Edwards with three models of civil society, the main question Pemberton tried to answer in the book is; how do we build politically educated communities - communities that are interested and engaged in shaping and managing changes within their own localities and transmitting lessons learned in the process? At the outset, he explained that the book is about an exchange of ideas over civil society on recurring themes: social inequality and exclusion, solidarity and individuality, the church's public life, the relationship of civil society to the state, and the skills to discern criteria that can be used for judging these arrangements in the discipline of theology. Theology in this perspective is mostly postliberal Christian.

The book is divided into three parts and all three parts of the book, to my judgment, require three separate reviews to effectively understand the richness of the contributors' insights. In this book review, only salient points are selectively chosen in the chapters and will be discussed. Chapter 1 begins with a work on the history of broad-based community organising by Jane Wills, who observed that although memberships of associations relating to conservation and environment have shown an increase, data on political participation at the national scale in British history shows a decline in almost all forms of

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political and civic activities. Although market forces are consistently challenging their charity and religious works, for Wills, community organising provides a model and opportunity for religious groups, as well as creating a door for direct participation of the less advantaged people to engage in self-organisation. In such community organising groups, people can develop leadership and organisational skills which are crucial for human development, thus the need of preparation for participation in political life.

The issue of anthropogenic climate change requires global attention and intention. Relating to this, in Chapter 2, Anna Huxley discusses global religious civil societies and their environmental campaigns. Responding to claims on the inconsistency of civil societies, particularly the ones involving liberation, theology, and charity, Huxley suggests a renewal of liberation theology, which includes the subject of the poor, with inclusivity as a strategy to combat the anthropogenic environmental problem. To be successful, a change in praxis at all levels; individually, locally, nationally and internationally must always be the top agenda.

Taking the church as a form of an association, Al Barrett, in Chapter 3, drawing from Graham Ward's work on Christology of postliberal projects, suggests danger in reinforcing the expulsions of contemporary capitalism. Who would benefit if not the church itself? Al Barret brings forth questions such as, "When political theology takes an ecclesial turn, who is left out in the cold?" and, "How do civil societies mediate the state and market?" In the following three chapters, Pemberton compiles and highlights how the contributors explore this mediation as a theological, political and ecclesiological task.

Benefiting from the work of Gillian Rose and Graham Ward, in Chapter 4, Raubach contended that despite their claims of political neutrality, new social media forms of communication creates hierarchies of power and are thus highly political. Raubach's argument on new social media critics are increasingly available and found in many works recently. In short, new social media fails to offer emancipatory potential, which is expected for community development and in challenging postliberalism. Instead of serving as a mediator for civil societies, new social media has been used to benefit capitalists and nihilists, hence benefiting the state and market whilst destroying social power in the process.

Through her reading on Hegel's comments in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, in Chapter 5, Friedrike Schick showed her concern on the relationship between religion and modern society. She is pessimistic of this relationship as she believes that despite religion providing an important avenue for the development and further understanding of a society, incidentally, it would result in a freedom that would nonetheless produce servitude. This might also imply that Hegel's understanding of civil society informs us that propensity of individualistic and property owning from the civil society process would produce both wealth and poverty simultaneously.

With 'deep solidarity' of the God of the Israelites, with Moses and Jesus Christ being at the heart of his work, Joerg Rieger's approach to contemporary exploitation in Chapter 6 invites experts to understand the importance of the state and market in developing the spirit of solidarity through the civil society process. The teaching of the deep solidarity of God – according to Rieger – brings together middle and working classes' share economically, more so than dividing them. The lesson learned from Rieger's work is that the merging of class analysis together with the logic tripartite analysis of the state, market and civil society, with the class analysis at its center, is still more than relevant. Moreover, its dynamic will benefit all if the church critically interrogates both its own practices as well as others.

The last part of Pemberton's book questions on how religious capital is as important as social capital, as well as how, indirectly, the counter-hegemony approach can promote civil society's development from the richness of theological sources. Responding to postliberal critiques of modern politics and economics, Ben Wood, in Chapter 7, believes on a type of liberalism that blends freedom and reform with conservation and renewal, asking whether it is possible to find historical examples of liberalism with a propensity for tradition, which he sees in Jo Grimond (British politician, leader of the Liberal Party for eleven years from 1956 to 1967).

Andrew Shanks, in Chapter 8, puts side by side Hegel and Fr. Daniel Berrigan (an American civil society activist and Roman Catholic priest), hoping that he would be able to understand their debate

and dialogue on confessional religion, progressive state-led reform, and third sector public consciousness movements. Shanks tried to show the two figures' creative exchange from resources on the Christian tradition regarding the possibility of utilizing the human will to control, divide or exclude (materialize through propaganda or other means) in order to have a better society.

Embracing the idea of a moral or civil economy, Adrien Pabst, in Chapter 9, anticipated what a postliberal economy and state would look like when not only the concept of social justice becomes important, but the strong hope for theology is no longer just an option. Focusing her thoughts on the intermediary structure of civil society, she believes that postliberalism would mean giving people agency in the search for a meaningful life through civil society. Hence, the state and market are embedded in the intermediate realm. Pabst believes that postliberalism orients a shift from unfettered market capitalism to economic justice and reciprocity.

Politically, this would also mean that solidarity will give people agency, therefore majority politics based on the balance of interests and shared identity will triumph over the minority politics of vested interests. Readers who have no philosophical and religious training would certainly find it hard to internalize the idea in the book, and it is Pemberton's role to unpack many theories, concepts and terms in future editions to make the book more reader-friendly. People of other faiths should take the same task of highlighting the importance of religious life as an alternative and compliment to democratic life; the way forward for a strong and civilized society.

