The Protestant (and Other) Ethics and the Spirit of Civil Society: Expanding the Social Origins Theory

Govert J. Buijs

In their attempt to explain the cross-cultural variations in the patterns of nonprofit development Salamon and Anheier have made use of the so called ‘social origins approach’ (inspired by Barrington Moore and Esping-Andersen). However, in the different expositions that they have given of this approach there are quite different emphases to be found. In one of the earlier accounts of this Social Origins Theory, the main emphasis is on socio-structural variables like the development of and interrelations between various classes and social institutions. The central theoretical background image of society that is chosen here seems to be the image of the ‘clash of powers’ and the socio-cultural factors like religion are somehow subsumed under these structural powerrelations.(1)

A year later, when analyzing the Third World’s Third Sector, Salamon and Anheier give extensive attention to the specific ethical content of the various religions that have left their imprint on different societies in the Third World, Protestantism, Hinduism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and ‘African Religions’. (2) However, here again, in their final analysis Salamon and Anheier do not quite account for this new socio-cultural emphasis.

If one would use a simple 19th century dichotomy to classify sociological theorists, namely either Marxian or Weberian, Salamon and Anheier in their first approach would clearly classify as more Marxian. However, a year later they seem to be more inclined to a Weberian approach - and at the end of the day back of again.

In my paper, the thrust of which will be more theoretical than empirical, I would like to take up the more Weberian approach, acknowledging the independent role of socio-cultural factors, including religion. I intend to substantiate some empirical claims regarding the role of the various religions in the development of civil society, partly based on the work of Inglehart. On this basis I intend to develop a theoretical understanding of how religion as a social factor ‘works’. A key concept here will be the one that is developed by Charles Taylor, the notion of a ‘moral horizon’. I will identify various dimensions of the ‘moral horizon’ and give some suggestions as to how they are shaped by different religions. In this way the Social Origins Theory can be expanded (actually using a lead given by Salamon and Anheier themselves).

In the final part of my paper I will reflect on some of the implications of this approach for the universality of concepts as ‘civil society’ and ‘third sector’. Is there some universal ethical basis for a ‘global civil society’? Is there a ‘clash of civilizations’ to be expected in respect to these very concepts as well? Or are there other options?