

Religion and Hegemony. A Short Reflection on Developments in Europe and China

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Abstract

The paper gives a short overview over some church-state configurations through the history of Europe. It uses the concept of hegemony as introduced by Gramsci to point at attempts from church and state to claim leadership and to find public consent for its goals. The reflections show how some 20th century experiences quite radically changed the awareness of the churches.

Church-state relationships in China after 1949 can equally be viewed under the concept of hegemony. We can thus understand ‘harmonious society’ as a hegemonial discourse that has important bridging and healing function in the context of the radical changes happening in China.

A final paragraph discusses the role of Christianity in the process of modernity. The growth of Christianity is both, an expression and side-product of this growth, as also a response that tries to heal the wounds of a process that has fundamentally changed the whole of Chinese society. A decisive question will be whether Christianity can have an impact on the increasingly destructive run of modernization in China and the tremendous ecological disaster that takes place.

The term hegemony, as introduced by Antonio Gramsci, usually refers to the impact of civil society and the agencies of civil society – religious groups, trade unions, and any voluntary associations – on the exertion of political power. The idea is that any form of political leadership depends on the spontaneous consent of civil society. A political leadership cannot survive on the long term if it only relies on brute force and is unable to convince the civil society to unite behind its own ideas. *Hegemony* is the ensemble of cultural, ideological, religious, or also economical, political, and social tools through which such spontaneous consent is achieved.

We can study the relationship between the political power and religion with the concept of hegemony in mind, under the perspective of how and through what channels leadership is established.

1. Church and State in Europe until 1648

The past 1700 years of European history has been shaped by a close interaction between church and political government. The Western world developed all through the medieval time under the competing leadership of spiritual government and secular government. The peak of ecclesial claim for primacy in the 11th century, when the church rejected all secular interference in its own affairs, was at the same time the turning point and possibly the beginning of the secularization process in Europe.¹ The investiture controversy meant a separation of spiritual and secular and allowed the secular government to develop according to its own terms. The configuration of this interdependent and yet conflicting

¹ That is the theory of Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde.

relationship radically changed with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that brought the confessional wars after the Reformation in continental Europe to an end. The importance of the Peace of Westphalia was to *limit the churches and their political power after their conflicts had brought such tremendous suffering over the people of Europe.*

This is in radical contrast to the development in the US: Based on their experience of religious persecution the Europeans migrating to the US developed a political system that should precisely prevent any government from interfering in the affairs of the church. The political system in Europe in contrast wanted to prevent the churches ever to bring so deep destruction over Europe.

The history of the church-state relationship was shaped by the mutual attempt to use the other side for own interests: The political government used the church for social stratification, as social stabilizer, as tool for warfare, or as legitimation for expansion. The spiritual government used the political government to protect its properties and to support its spiritual expansion.

2. Church and State in Europe in the Context of Modernity

The beginning secularization process that started in the 17th century signified a radical shift in the relationship between church and state and at least superficially a tremendous shift in authority towards the political leadership.

The church reacted and continued to develop with a fluctuating role:

- a) Partly the churches maintained a self-understanding as received from tradition, the role of *embracing the whole of society* and to provide spiritual leadership to the whole of society. However, it accepted the leadership of the political realm and filled in the niches and the gaps that were left empty. The church offered care where special needs arose, provided meaning where cold rationality came to its limits, and represented the spiritual dimension vis-à-vis society. This is the story of the so-called '*state churches*'.
- b) Partly the churches withdrew from defining herself in relation to the overall society and set up an *alternative community*. This community was equally caring for society at large, but didn't understand herself as gathering the whole of society. Rather this community stood in contrast to many of the dominant values of society. This is the story of the so-called '*free churches*'.

Comments

1. The dual development of the church *didn't start with modernity*; rather the whole church history from the time of Constantine can be read under the perspective of a dualism between church as a more integrating community and church as an alternative community. However, after the emergence of Protestantism and various Protestant churches the dualism became a dominant factor in the churches' development.
2. The duality is *not an exclusive duality*. Although the dual history of Christianity is full of tensions, including reciprocal condemnations, the interaction between the two forms of development often inspired each other and was based on mutual respect. Many diaconical ministries emerged from the free churches and inspired the state churches. Many persons fluctuated between the two sides.
3. The interaction between a church that was close to the political establishment and a church standing in critical distance to it *inspired a dynamic and rich development* within in the church and beyond. Even the development of Enlightenment thinking, although in many ways in contrast to faith, emphasizing instead the power of reason, and the subsequently starting process of secularization that radically transformed Europe and its institutions, cannot be understood without the contributions from these two different traditions of Christianity.
4. The dual development of state churches and free churches is stronger in Protestant areas, but not restricted to them. Free Church movements exist also in traditional Catholic areas. The difference is that the Catholic Church absorbs them as spiritual movements within the church.

Both kinds of churches, ‘state churches’ and ‘free churches’ are subject to hegemonial claims by the political leadership and to attempts of turning them into elements of a dominant discourse – political, economical, or else. The state churches are, however, more vulnerable to being functionalized as they define themselves as having an integrating function.

3. Church and State in the 20th and Early 21st Century

Several experiences shaped the church-state configuration in the 20th century:

- The most important experience was the relative failure of the churches to raise their voices against the totalitarianism of Nazism, Fascism, and Bolshevism. The critical self-reflection after WWII led the state churches in parts of Western Europe to recover their prophetic role in relation to the state.
- The process of European integration and the wider parallel process of globalization sharpened the churches’ awareness of standing in a dynamic interaction within a multicultural and multireligious society.

The European experience with totalitarian governments and the development of a highly diverse society within a unifying Europe has taught the churches to be *sensitive* to all kinds of totalitarianisms –be it the totalitarianisms of economic rationality, an exclusivist understandings of Europe, or the authoritarian claim of any particular tradition.

The attempts for hegemonial leadership in Europe naturally continue, and with it the political attempts to give direction to the churches. After the political experiences of the past century attempts to give direction to the churches from outside are usually met with higher awareness about the risks of being defined through political means.

An Example

If Jacques Delors, the former president of the European Commission, invites the churches to provide a spiritual dimension to the dominantly economical and technocratic interests of the process of European Unification he will be met friendly and skeptically: Friendly, because the churches understand that growth in spirituality is a crucial element of any holistic growth process; skeptically, because the invitation smells of a political definition of the task and responsibility of the churches. The churches are, receiving such an invitation, supposed to fill in the gaps that the political and economic process has left.

The role of the churches / religions is first to understand this hegemonial process, and then to contrast it with an alternative project, one that is based on the values of the religious tradition.

The questions that churches and religions alike continuously discuss in the process of a unifying Europe, and on the background of the special experiences of the past centuries, are:

- What does ‘Europe’ stand for?
- What are the essentials of the project of a unifying Europe?
- Who defines what Europe stands for?
- What are the values of Europe?
- What are the borders of Europe?

Christian churches additionally ask more particularly:

- As Christianity fundamentally shaped the history and development of Europe, what is its role now when Europe becomes more multi-religious?

4. State and Religion in China after 1949

The dominance of the Communist Party shaped the relationship between church and state in modern China. In the absence of a democratically defined representation of the different parts of society other channels were necessary for the political leadership to integrate the different movements of civil society in its own vision of the New China, in the case of religious groups most importantly agencies like the United Front Department of the CP.

The importance of gathering the diverse social interest behind the dominant leadership has in the past years tremendously grown. The most important reasons are:

- a) Since the economic opening of China 30 years ago the diversity of the Chinese society has grown exponentially. To unite an increasingly complex, divers, and affluent society behind the goals of one party has become increasingly difficult.
- b) Parallel to the growth of a more diverse society a tremendous growth of religious life emerged. China experiences at present an enormous growth of Christian faith and estimation about the number of Christians in China, Protestant and Roman-Catholic, go up to 80 or 100 Mio. Besides the growth in Christian churches there is a similar, even if numerically lesser growth in Buddhism. Beyond these mainstream faith groups, there is also a growth in a variety of religious movements.
- c) The economic development in China has led to an increasing wealth gap. The tensions and wounds arising from social injustice is more and more threatening the fundamentals of the present government. A process of healing and integrating diverging social interests become crucial.

In this context the government is discovering the important contribution of faith groups for the healing of society and the maintenance of its coherence. There is an increasing respect of officials regarding the positive social impacts of Christianity and other religions. Obviously the government is interested in furthering those parts of faith communities that are directly supporting the present political order and the stable development of society. That is where the discourse of a ‘harmonious society’ becomes important.

5. The Discourse of a ‘Harmonious Society’

The expression ‘harmonious society’ has in recent years played a crucial role within the development of all aspects of culture, religion, and social institutions in China: All of them should aim at enhancing the harmony of society. The expression has an important several functions:

- a) The immediate and direct purpose of the discourse emphasizing the values of a harmonious society is to correct the tensions that have emerged since China opened its economy and society. The emphasis on harmony should remind the citizens that the emerging tensions should be healed in a harmonious way. The value of the harmonious society underlines the primacy of the collectivity in a context where empowered individuals have unprecedented economical power.
- b) On a deeper level the discourse that emphasizes *harmony* establishes a link to the rich Chinese tradition: It revives a concept that is deeply rooted in Confucian tradition and fits the renewed emphasis on the religious and spiritual traditions of

China, a kind of *renaissance of Neo-Confucianism*, similar to other Asian societies like Singapore. According to Confucian tradition, harmony was the goal of every Chinese dynasty and it was what bound rulers and subjects together: The emperor was responsible for the well-being of his subjects and for peace and harmony within society. The subjects owed loyalty and obedience to the ruler and any insurrection threatened the harmony of society.

- c) The discourse implicitly admits that the course of modernization as run in China lacks ethical direction and a spiritual dimension. It tries to correct the one-sidedness of the developments of the past 30 years.

‘Harmonious society’ started to become a dominant motive in the government-led discourse when the emergence of Falun Gong reminded the political leadership of the threatening power of religious and possibly counter-cultural undercurrents of society. By choosing a motive that is rooted deeply in Chinese tradition some spiritual ownership was maintained and the genuine Chinese character of this goal was reaffirmed. The discourse was intended as a contextual form of responding to the challenge from Falun Gong and other religious movements that were declared heretic. The success of many of these movements was at least partly because they successfully tapped into the people’s search for religious expression rooted in genuine Chinese culture.

6. The Churches and the Harmonious Society

Religious and cultural representatives and thinkers have soon started to adapt the social goal of a ‘harmonious society’ to their own traditions and rediscover many of their own activities and programs as integral part of the overall aim of establishing a harmonious society. Thus, the Protestant Churches, united under the umbrella of the TSPM/CCC, emphasize the contribution of their social ministry to the healing of society. Or the program of *Theological Reconstruction*, initiated by Bishop Ting and the leaders of TSPM/CCC and a program that tries to overcome the traditional dependence of Chinese theological tradition from the West and especially the missionary past, has successfully adopted the vision of a harmonious society and discovers the fundamental convergence between the goals of the church and the state.²

The problem of this keyword of Chinese political discourse is obviously that it has been developed from above and roots in a spiritual and philosophical tradition that is constructed from above. It first represents the interests of the present political system and political party and is as such part of a hegemonial attempt to establish consensus for the goals of political leadership, first of all the maintaining of a stable society, from above.

It can be assumed that the movement of house churches – the ‘free church’ counterpart to the churches gathered under the umbrella of TSPM/CCC – is more critical about the discourse of a ‘harmonious society’. As they experience political pressure to submit to the united front strategy they directly experience something of the downside of the ‘harmonious society’ and the price for dissent. However, they are at the same time bound to the positive connotation of this social goal and obviously do contribute to harmony in society.

² I have analyzed this process more extensively in ‘Jianshe Theology: Reflections about the Process of Theological Reconstruction in China’, *International Review of Mission*, No. 369, Vol. 93, April 2004, published in Chinese in the *Nanjing Theological Review*.

Questions for the future will be:

- How can the faith communities continue to define their social role?
- How can the churches balance the diaconical ministry and the prophetic role that goes beyond the given society and aims at a continuous transformation of society?
- What does ‘harmonious society’ mean if not part of a hegemonial discourse from above, but part of a transforming discourse from below?

7. Christianity and Modernity

There are different theories trying to explain the tremendous growth of Christianity in present day China. The different explanations complement each other:

- a) Christianity grows parallel to modernity in China as traditional religious faith loses its relevance in a modern world. Superstition gives way to an interaction with the world based on science. The demons lose their power in the concrete towers and the traffic of the modern city.
- b) Christianity as a faith that is most deeply connected to modernity is bound to equally benefit from the modernization process.
- c) The traditional ancestor worship was based on the family. The decay of the large family structure has undermined the social basis of traditional faith and thus makes it obsolete.
- d) Christianity offers a community that replaces the lost family coherence. Chinese churches particularly emphasize the church as a household and as a family. The members of the church actively build a network of mutual support.
- e) The commitment to a Christian community and fellowship stands in contrast to the decay of social relationships all around. It offers an alternative community and a sense of belonging.
- f) The social changes, urbanization and migration of a rural population into urban centers has led to a sense of *anomie*, a feeling of moral meaninglessness and uncertainty. People seek protection, new meaning and coherence in a new and strict community. The emerging faith groups are a *protest* against these uncertainties *and* at the same time *a form of adaptation to the needs of modernity*.³
- g) The emerging faith communities are defensive responses to modernization, sanctuaries for the frightened masses, shelters designed to protect the people from the assaults of modernity. They are a protest against modernity and a return to the patterns of the pre-modern feudal society.⁴

These are just some of the most common ways of explaining the growth of Christianity in China.

The political leadership has in the past 30 years actively promoted the process of modernization. It is the dominance of a certain form of economy and scientific rationality and, as the theories above explain in different ways, Christian faith groups absorbed this modernization process, adapted to the new social context, offered alternatives, or healed those who were hurt in the process of modernization. The process of modernization in China is increasingly experienced as ambiguous. More and more people directly suffer

³ This is how Emilio Willems (Followers of the New Faith, 1967) explained the raise of Pentecostalism in Chile and Brazil.

⁴ Cf. Christian Lalive d’Epinay, Haven of the Masses (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969).

under the destructive effects of economic growth, most obviously in the ecological disaster that is taking place in China.

The questions for the future will be:

- How can Christian faith groups (and possible other faith groups) influence the modernization process as a whole beyond the mere healing of wounds: How can they have an impact on the unbroken modernization optimism among many political and economic leaders?
- Does the discourse of the harmonious society offer a chance to include the care for the environment and to allow a more gentle approach to the natural world? At that point it might be interesting to ask: What about other Asian societies who emphasize traditional values? – Japan? Thailand?

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