



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

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## *PUBLIC JUSTICE IN REVIEW*

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### 2018: The Year in Published Public Justice

Byron Borger

**Byron Borger** has owned and operated Hearts & Minds, a bookstore in Dallastown (PA) with his wife Beth for 36 years.

In the upcoming weeks, CPJ will offer a handful of essays reviewing some significant books that speak to areas of our research and advocacy. We will strive to offer a “lay of the land,” naming books that capture something of the spirit of the age, discerning the perspectives in play within these arenas. From family policy to religious liberty to responsible citizenship, we’ll describe some recent books that illustrate and deepen the conversations. Hopefully, as our staff and Fellows reflect on these books that capture characteristics of the current state of the discussion, our own historic, Reformed worldview will shine through, even if only between the lines. That is, we want to highlight something of the Center’s unique “public justice” framework by way of a review of the year’s stories, challenges and key books.

First, we start off reminding readers that this has been a fruitful season for books about contemporary life, including studies of the political ideologies and attitudes functioning in the public sphere these days. We see this from an extraordinary number of books about our current President – perhaps symbolized by the way Robert Woodward’s breathtaking [\*Fear: Trump in the White House\*](#) became an immediate best-seller – to many from the religious publishing world. We see, therefore, many books about public life, but not – perhaps – politics, for as we will see few of the Christian books are about politics as such, and are often individualistic, or issue oriented, in nature, failing to adequately develop a Christian social theory or coherent political philosophy.

After decades of a dearth of popular books about the public aspects of discipleship, just a few years ago there was a batch of books released making the case for a Biblical approach to justice. The books were mostly from evangelical publishing houses. In one season, there was [\*Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just\*](#) by Tim Keller; the award-winning [\*The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance\*](#) by CPJ friends Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson; and, among others, [\*Advocating for Justice: An Evangelical Vision for Transforming Systems and Structures\*](#), a collaborative project edited by Stephen Offutt. There was such a notable interest in justice these last few years that a helpful book was released asking why: see [\*Return to Justice: Six Movements That Reunited Our Contemporary Evangelical Conscience\*](#) by Soong-Chan Rah and Gary Vanderpol.

## Public Justice by the Issues

This year, it seems, we've seen fewer books about the principles and theology of justice. We've seen more that tell the stories of those who have struggled to live out social concern in their own lives. Evangelical publishing houses have produced a steady stream of books that are penned by young, often rather progressive people of color, reminding us all that Biblical faith always takes into consideration the plight of the outsider, the marginalized, the poor and the oppressed. Many of our most reliable publishers have released books that take up the cry for justice in compelling, Biblically and theologically faithful ways. And many of these books are inspiring, as we seek to embody a social ethic that shapes Christian discipleship in our public lives.

For instance, Kathy Khang has written a book that one reviewer called "profound, courageous, and important," entitled [\*Raise Your Voice: Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up\*](#) (IVP). This study invites us to learn the art of speaking up – especially about social injustice – in various spheres of life. There is no doubt that her good stories and wise insight will help those of us wanting to be better stewards of the gift of citizenship. There are social forces that may push us to stay silent, but here we have "God's permission" to use our voices in the public square as we advocate for God's principles and for His justice.

A resource such as this may not describe the particulars of the CPJ commitments to a multi-varied public square or principled pluralism as a framework for civic life. However, even those of us who are deeply grounded in the CPJ vision can be inspired to think carefully about how we represent our Lord in public (even on social media). Khang and her passionate book can help.

Another book that illustrates the recent plethora of evangelical titles about a more holistic and justice-seeking public discipleship is [\*A Sojourner's Truth: Choosing Freedom and Courage in a Divided World\*](#) (IVP) by Natasha Sistrunk Robinson. Robinson, a woman of color, is an international speaker and founder of non-profit Leadership LINKS. She is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a born storyteller. The truths to which she bears witness are often painful and will equip us to think more honestly about race and poverty, exclusion and division, grace and justice. She not only tells her own story but also intertwines lessons from the life of Moses, making this a great book for small Bible study groups. Again, it is not a book on politics as such, but it opens up rich ways of understanding how leaders are formed and how we think about renewal, reconciliation and restoration.

A very impressive author who has a remarkable gift of being able to draw major themes about life and times by way of telling her own story is Amy Julia Becker (who has written two beautiful books about her own journey into motherhood and a handicapped daughter). Her new one, [\*White Picket Fences: Turning Toward Love in a World Divided by Privilege\*](#) (NavPress), in the words of Andy Crouch, "helps us believe that in a world so often torn by violence and indifference, love can still have the last and best word." CPJ has long been interested in creating social architecture that creates "justice for all." That is, our work in citizenship and public policy is based on a social theory of pluralism where we can live with our deepest differences. Yet, we cannot work to create a flourishing social (or legal) order based on pluralism if we don't at least acknowledge some of the ways our differences have been manifested. Race and class are not the only factors that have caused great divides in our world, but there is no doubt that we must talk about privilege. I recently heard an esteemed Christian leader railing against an evangelical college that teaches about white privilege, and I wanted to press this

book into his hands. Becker admits that “the word alone can make us flinch.” [\*White Picket Fences\*](#) invites us to respond to privilege with generosity, humility and hope. CPJ friends will find it especially appealing because it is not a book driven by liberal or conservative ideologies, red state or blue state dispositions. If taken seriously, it can inform our own work in developing a just public philosophy and help us be not only better neighbors but also more faithful citizens.

[\*A House United: How the Church Can Save the World\*](#) by Allen Hilton (Fortress Press) is a wonderful example. It is one that makes us aware of our cultural moment and realize that there are vast political implications that flow from our faith. Hilton enters the fray of contested public values and policies but is clear about putting first things first. He reminds us that for Christians, our unity in Christ should shape us to be people who are honest about our differences and who are able to navigate conflict without rancor. Whether Catholic or Protestant, mainline denominational or evangelical, we belong to one another as members of the Body of Christ. We should elevate the call to unity even as we recognize that we have serious theological disagreements; because we do this within the Church, we should be practiced at doing it in the world of contentious political division as well. Is this a pipe dream: Christian people learning to respect those of other denominations and faith-styles, with such forbearance teaching us to be more civil in the political sphere? Can the church help, in this sense, save the world from its uncivil wars?

This book tells of those who model for the world the sort of civility the public sector so badly needs. As Hilton notes, “Extremists in American politics rely on Christians to be the engine that pushes the culture farther Right or Left.” Religion doesn’t have to be a fuel for the culture wars. We can take up practices of graciousness even in the face of American polarization.

What would have made this book stronger is A CPJ-formulated vision of structural pluralism and more attention to the nature of the presuppositions that inform both Red State and Blue State. No political tendency is religiously neutral. As good as the call to civility may be, Hilton doesn’t quite help us see how realizing our unity within the One Body of Christ translates into a less polarized and angry public square. Still, his vision is inspiring for all of us who care about the state of our civil discourse. It makes good sense to follow his suggestions for reaching out in friendship to those who see things differently than we do.

Ed Stetzer has a brand-new book that treads similar ground. It does not work directly for political policy reforms, but it advances a spirituality of neighborly grace to help heal our testy polarization. The book is called [\*Christians in an Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst\*](#) (Tyndale). A well-known evangelical voice for congregational revitalization, Stetzer often speaks at missional church events. He proclaims a Kingdom vision for those in the local church to be agents of God’s purposes in the world, and he is helping us do that with this brand-new bit of social evaluation, naming the crisis of our being “people of outrage.” In it, Stetzer responds to research done documenting evangelicals troubling relationship to expressions of outrage. He attempts to “describe the contours of our age and offers a constructive way forward as Christians.” Must we routinely react in such aggrieved dramatic tones to every problem, even to serious injustices? Stetzer does not call us to apathy or to minimize the weight of great evil. Rather, he calls us to bear mature Christ-like postures of civic engagement by being formed in ways of patience and hope, not stridency and outrage. This has long been a conviction of CPJ.

CPJ founder James Skillen used to often preach from the parable of the tares in Matthew 13. In it, weeds were sown in the King's field by his enemies, reminding us that we are not to pull out the weeds in rash judgment. We serve the common good with patience, as we are in an era, as Skillen used to say, when God causes (in his common grace) "rain to fall on the just and unjust alike" (Matthew 5:45.) As with most books on social concern these days, [\*Christians in an Age of Outrage\*](#) does not have an adequately developed social philosophy that would attend to God's norms for what we might call the structures, or the social architecture, of our public order. However, it certainly gives us a hearty reminder to be gracious and patient and Christ-like. And such a posture will surely help us advance our political concerns in the Lord's way.

Any survey of the sort of books coming out from evangelical publishing houses these days will notice many reports of robust social concern, even if there are fewer about justice and politics, as such. For instance, in the last few months, we've seen books on economics, such as [\*Redeeming Capitalism\*](#) by Kenneth Barnes and [\*Missional Economics: Biblical Justice and Christian Formation\*](#) by Michael Barram and [\*Always With Us? What Jesus Really Said About the Poor\*](#) by Liz Theoharis (each published by Eerdmans). Additionally, there are a number of new books describing ministry with refugees and immigrants, such as [\*You Welcomed Me: Loving Refugees and Immigrants Because God First Loved Us\*](#) by former Haitian aid worker Kent Annan (IVP) and [\*Once We Were Strangers: What Friendship with a Syrian Refugee Taught Me About Loving My Neighbor\*](#) by Shawn Smucker (Baker). There have been fresh voices for environmental stewardship, including [\*Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World\*](#) by Douglas and Jonathan Moo (Zondervan). There is material concerning criminal justice reform, like [\*Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores\*](#) by Dominique DuBois Gilliard [IVP] and the long-awaited, scholarly [\*Ending Overcriminalization and Mass Incarceration: Hope from Civil Society\*](#) by Anthony Bradley [Cambridge University Press]. There are books about domestic violence (see Elaine Storkey's [\*Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women\*](#) [SPCK]). Those of us concerned about honoring the Lordship of Christ over all social spheres can be glad for these kinds of books. They call us beyond a merely personal faith to one that takes up the cross and travels into the struggles of this hurting world.

## **Public Justice as Political Discipleship**

There are two books about the Biblical call to justice that have come out this year. They are exactly in the tradition of CPJ and the Dutch reformational political movement from 19<sup>th</sup> century Holland. The movement was inspired by Abraham Kuyper, who became the Prime Minister of Holland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and had a robust and creative approach to civic and structural pluralism. Both books have received longer reviews, but for our purposes here, they stand in contrast to issue-based books above because they explore the very structures of civic life in light of God's norms and principles for government and citizenship. Although they are not about statecraft, they are somewhat political in nature. They are directly informed by the political orientation of principled pluralism.

First, there is the magisterial third volume in James K.A. Smith's "cultural liturgies" project, entitled [\*Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology\*](#) (Baker Academic). Smith's trilogy (and the more accessible summary, [\*You Are What You Love\*](#) [Brazos Press]) have been much discussed in our circles. They have helped many gain a fresh – some might say postmodern – take on the nature of worldviews. They also deal with the way cultural practices shape our desires and how good worship with a robust Kingdom vision can recalibrate our hearts and imaginations, all for the common

good. [\*Awaiting the King\*](#) has been of particular interest to us at CPJ, as it shows how Smith's overall project will inform our public lives and what he calls political theology.

Smith teaches philosophy at Calvin College and is very familiar with Kuyper and the subsequent philosophers in that neo-Calvinist tradition. These philosophers, from Herman Dooyeweerd to Nicholas Wolterstorff to Elaine Botha to Calvin Seerveld, gave rise to reformationally worldviewish social visionaries of the likes of Bob Goudzwaard, Jonathan Chaplin, David Koyzis and CPJ founder James Skillen. Further, Smith is in regular dialogue with current scholars of other faith traditions. In [\*Awaiting the King\*](#), he pays special attention to African American scholar Willie James Jennings and his important work [\*The Christian Imagination: Theology and The Origins of Race\*](#). While rooted in the neo-Calvinists tenants of sphere sovereignty and akin social formulations such as subsidiarity, he pushes our public theology in generative ways. He invites us all to think about our citizenship and politics in light of our longing for the coming of God's Kingdom. Although Smith is not a political scientist, and this book does not develop principles for statecraft, it is a very important book for our movement and a vital study of Christian political theology.

Secondly, one of the most important books of public theology and Christian political witness in recent years is [\*Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear\*](#) by Matthew Kaemingk (Eerdmans). After a fabulous foreword by James K.A. Smith, Kaemingk goes back to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Holland to evaluate Kuyper's robust understanding of worldviews. He looks at how the consequential political model of principled pluralism created, among the Dutch, a very eager openness to others and what might be called a more liberal immigration policy. Alas, that rather open attitude – which Kaemingk attributes to the Kuyperian influences from a century before – fell apart almost overnight when a great, great grandson of Vincent Van Gogh was brutally murdered by Muslim extremists. A look at this raises questions. How did a land so steeped in Christian grace and Christ's Lordship, which created a structure for pluralism and civility, become so hostile to outsiders? And how can any of us think well about our friendship and conversations with those of Islamic faith? Can the religious and political vision of Kuyper help us find a better approach to the European refugee crisis and to our own Christian-Muslim relations? As Jordan Ballor of the Acton Institute put it, [\*Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration\*](#) "...asks what Amsterdam has to do with Mecca, and the answers he finds turn out to have implications the world over."

Kaemingk is a fine young theologian, an energetic citizen-activist and a wise contemporary Kuyperian addressing what is one of the most vexing political questions of our time. We at CPJ celebrate his significant contribution. We can only pray for more books that draw on the roots of our neo-Calvinist tradition and nurture branches of relevant social witness that might bear fruit in real policy initiatives.

### **Public Justice in Review**

We can rejoice that many Christians are embodying a holistic and thoughtful sort of public discipleship. As the titles listed above illustrate, many are not driven primarily by secularist ideologies of the left or right. Rather, they are trying to be Biblically and theologically faithful, even in exploring social issues and the concerns of the day. This has been a banner year for books that tell the stories of those who care. However, as we've seen, most do not seem to have grappled much with the questions of a coherent social philosophy that might help form the infrastructure – the social architecture – of civil society (let alone a uniquely Christian political theory).

If we are going to steward well our extraordinary gift of citizenship and develop proper political responses to the challenges and issues in the books above, we will need something like a 21st equivalent of Abraham Kuyper. We can learn from his “anti-revolutionary” party and its chief political theorist, Groen Van Prinsterer, articulating a robust vision of government and a coherent and comprehensive policy agenda. Interestingly, a new translation of Van Prinsterer manifesto, [\*Unbelief and Revolution\*](#), is slated for release in 2019. Such historical work may help us bridge the inspiration of the sorts of books described above with the Christian Democratic and principled pluralist guiding lights of CPJ’s past.

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To respond to the author of this article please email [PJR@cpjustice.org](mailto:PJR@cpjustice.org). The articles in the *Public Justice Review* do not represent a consensus of positions on questions of public policy. We do not expect our readers will agree with all the arguments they find here, but we believe that within the broad tradition of what we call public justice we can do more by providing a forum for the debate and exchange of Christians, within those bounds, to work out public policy faithful to God and in service of our neighbors. We do not necessarily share the views expressed, but we do accept responsibility for giving them a chance to appear.