



PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

MAKING PEACE WITH PROXIMATE PLURALISM

Vol. 8 Issue 4, 2018

Proximate Pluralism: The Dissatisfactions – and Blessings! – of Civic Pluralism

Stanley Carlson-Thies

Stanley Carlson-Thies is the Founder and Senior Director of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance (IRFA), a division of the Center for Public Justice.

“Proximate pluralism”: in using this term, this series of the *Public Justice Review* calls attention to how pluralism in our political community, though a precious good, is a limited good. We should celebrate pluralism for the good it gives—space for people to live by conviction—in our circumstances of deep differences about religions, philosophies, and moralities. Yet we can mourn the compromises that pluralism structures into law and life. These compromises entail that the law will only imperfectly embody what we are (I am) sure is God’s good intentions for people, the world, structures and relationships. Adopting even more pluralism will not bring law and life ever closer to that design.

So “proximate pluralism” is a different kind of concept and reality than the idea of “proximate justice” [described by Steve Garber](#). Our efforts, Steve points out, never will bring in complete justice: the world is too broken, we are too weak. That’s no reason to give up. Instead, we should become long-distance runners instead of sprinters. We should labor intensively for, and then celebrate, the justice victories we are able to win, even while we await the return of Jesus and the arrival of full justice. “Proximate justice” is incomplete justice, but it is a step on the continuum to full justice; we should labor to achieve proximate justice, the repairs we can make to our world’s brokenness, even though our own efforts will never repair everything.

But “proximate pluralism,” partial pluralism in our political life, is not an approximation of the good in the same sense, as if the more fragmented, the more divided, a political community is, the closer it gets to Shalom. So, what is good about pluralism as a structuring principle for a political community, for the United States? Should we always qualify civic pluralism as “proximate” to remind ourselves that, even if it is a blessing during our in-between time, when we need to live together with others with whom we have deep disagreements, it is an arrangement for political community that must inevitably disappoint us?

These are the questions that lay out the work of this series of the *Public Justice Review*. While acknowledging the good that is principled or civic pluralism, we will explore the limitations inherent to it that must evoke disappointment in all who long for the fullness of the Kingdom of God. In this opening editorial, I want to offer a few reflections on pluralism, then some remarks on its disappointments, and finally an overview of what is to come.

First, celebrate diversity! This seems like the main injunction of Abraham Kuyper's line of Christian reflection on political life. And we do celebrate cultural diversity. Different customs, ethnicities, lines of work, languages, nationalities, geographical preferences: great! These are enlivening variations of human life that a just government should generally leave alone to flourish (although, because we are dealing with sinful humanity, not all customs can be left alone, and the government—and citizens—must counter efforts by some to use their differences from others to justify ill treatment of them).

We also celebrate structural pluralism—[the variety of callings and institutions in society](#). This variety is a fundamental good, baked into how God created and superintends the world. Government should protect, not overwhelm, the operations of schools, churches, hospitals, day care centers, service clubs, businesses. It should take care in its regulations and subsidies to respect their varied ways of operating, their rightful “sphere sovereignty.” Although a government, in some circumstances, may need to operate in one of these spheres, e.g., by creating a public university, even then it should be careful not to substitute its own norms for those appropriate to that other institution, and should not prevent other, non-governmental, parallel institutions from also flourishing.

But do Kuyperians also celebrate the many religions and idols of society? Sometimes it may seem that we do also celebrate the other major empirical diversity in society: multiple gods—the variety of religions, deep philosophies, and worldviews in society. After all, [the Kuyperian prescription for government is that it should](#) “treat all citizens—all members of the political community—on an equal civic basis without giving special privilege or negative discrimination to any of them because of their religious commitments.” Abraham Kuyper himself, in the later 19th century, [called not only for scholarship from a Calvinist perspective](#) but also, in the Dutch higher education setting, for the legal freedom to create a Reformed university (the Free University) to parallel the secular government-run universities and the Catholic university. And it was in significant part due to his vigorous commitment to confessional pluralism that the Netherlands came to be characterized by different religious and ideological social institutions, universities, trade unions, school systems, and [even television broadcasters](#).

Is this a celebration of religious diversity? Of course, in a Kuyperian view, it is not. In this perspective, pluralist government policy is not part of a multicultural celebration of religions and ideologies. Instead, it is the proper, obligatory, governmental acknowledgement of and response to the deep divisions of conviction that empirically exist in societies. Kuyperian pluralism is not an expression of the theological or philosophical view that all roads lead to God or that all belief systems are equally true (or rather equally false). That [kumbaya view](#) trivializes the asserted truth claims at the heart of Kuyper's much-loved Calvinism. The principled or civic pluralism approach is the opposite. It instructs government to accommodate and protect, not ignore, the different faiths and philosophies precisely because what the various adherents are asserting are truth claims. But government is not competent to render definitive judgments about such claims—these things are not Caesar's. And we citizens owe to one another generous respect for each other's striving to know and follow God or gods. Moreover, pluralism, just as other principles to guide government and citizens, requires that we, in

asking our neighbors to give us room to live in accordance with our deep convictions, also give them the room they need.

Kuyperian confessional pluralism is a rule and pattern for government, for how it should respond to the deep divisions of conviction that are alive among the citizens. It is not an applause machine urging ever more divisions, nor praise for a thousand faiths to bloom. That's why we can appropriately call it *civic pluralism*, pluralism as a rule for government, for law and policy, for the government's response to the existing divisions in society.

Behind the political prescription is an understanding of the human condition. Between the Fall and the Second Coming, societies are necessarily divided along lines of different, even conflicting, convictions. Some seek to follow God while others seek to follow one or another idol, some ideal or identity unhinged from God. More than obviously, even those seeking to follow God don't agree very much on what this entails.

And all of these aren't just beliefs inside brains or diverse worship practices leading some to a circle of great upright stone pillars and others to a mosque or a hidden church. They are ways of life, leading people to different ethical systems—pro-life doctors, pro-choice doctors; self-aggrandizement or care for neighbor. And different convictions lead to the creation of distinct varieties of different types of social institutions: Montessori, Catholic, orthodox Jewish, or secular-neighborhood schools, a financial institution that does, or does not, charge interest, a drug store that stocks neither cigarettes nor Plan B, or one that refuses to sell only the smokes.

That is, those different philosophies, ethical systems, and religions, lead to distinct ways of working at jobs and serving as a professional, and of designing and operating nonprofits and businesses, but only if the law, if government policy, allows and protects these efforts to live and serve in line with a faith or worldview. Only if the government carries out, as it should, a policy of civic pluralism.

Civic pluralism, then, is basically the implementation of religious freedom, drawing out consistently the requirement of religious freedom that the government must respect and protect the exercise of religion—the following of worldviews— by the citizens, their desire to live, work, serve, and worship in accordance with some religion or set of convictions, even though other citizens do not share that religion or those convictions. Religious freedom and civic pluralism are alternatives to both theocracy—all must live by the dictates of one religion—and official secularism ([French laïcité](#))—where religion is confined to narrow private spaces while everything in the public space must be resolutely non-religious. Instead, civic pluralism says, citizens and organizations can each fly their own flag.

Religious and philosophical divisions do exist. Because they do, a government policy that protects the freedom that adherents of the different views need to be able to live consistently with their diverse convictions is a great good: it keeps government from making decisions it is not competent to make, it implements the respect for a life of conviction that we owe to each other, it leaves it to the just and merciful God to decide which is the wheat, which the tares.

But civic pluralism is surely not an unambiguous or unalloyed good. Protecting diverse views means, yes, protecting error. It means protecting those who believe in the error, because of the respect we owe to them. True, civic pluralism also protects Jesus followers, even when ours is a minority and

despised worldview. And because of that protection, where it exists, Jesus followers have the large freedom not only to believe in Jesus but to live by his teachings and to spread the Good News to others, to wage a spiritual battle to win others from error to Jesus. That's a great and valuable freedom. Still, civic pluralism, and religious freedom, entails giving protection to those other convictions and ways of life, not using the law or government power to confine or slow them down, much less (attempt to) forbid their existence.

So civic or principled pluralism *should* give us disquiet. Besides the protection of error there is also the important worry that, by protecting a diversity of views, civic pluralism undermines the shared values important for social cohesion and voluntary obedience to government commands. And doesn't civic pluralism protect practices that can harm the political community and society over time: corrosive political views that degrade political life, relationship practices that undermine stable marriages, free-wheeling economic behavior that widens economic disparities and harms the very environment we depend upon?

And there are even more reasons for unease. Consider these other three problems springing from the existence of multiple views in society, a circumstance that civic pluralism protects, even if it does not celebrate:

1. The pressure to act against conviction. Let's posit, because it often happens, that the law adopts some set of values which you only share in part. You serve as (pick one) a judge, a county clerk, provost at a state university, a psychologist at Guantanamo Bay, or a licensed social worker. You discover more than once that what your job requires you to do is in conflict with what you are certain is right. What can you do? You ask to be excused or to make a referral, or you are fired, or you decide to do what is required though it goes against your own sense of what is best. None of these are satisfying options. But the more diversity of views in a society, the more such dilemmas will occur.
2. The harm of being turned away. Civic pluralism enables people of different convictions to [create organizations that reflect those varied beliefs](#) and to operate them in accordance with those different convictions about what is good and right (within limits). So, perhaps (in its *Masterpiece Cake* decision the US Supreme Court [partially punted](#)), the gay couple will not be able to buy a wedding cake designed by Jack Phillips. The orthodox Jewish family will have to travel many blocks to find a kosher deli, and in many towns will not be able to eat out at all. The agnostic student will chafe at the conduct requirements and much of the teaching at an evangelical college and an evangelical student will be concerned about the conduct standards (or their absence) and much of the teaching at the secular university. And, as a patron of In-N-Out Burger, I will [never be hired to represent PETA](#). Here we find dignitary harms, frictions, misunderstandings, delays in finding a service provider, and hurt all around.
3. The sorrow that many reject what is best for them. Yes, we owe respect to others and their search for truth. That's one kind of love for our neighbors. But we also owe to each other our best advice about what is good and true: the earth is not flat, the white race is not superior, not everything two people can do together

sexually is wonderful, people do have a spiritual dimension, and so on. Civic pluralism protects our freedom to speak out about what we are sure is right even though many are sure we are wrong and hateful and would rather not listen. At the same time, civic pluralism entails that we accept that others will reject our best advice and urge on us and society their (wrong) advice.

Yet, truth is not whatever we decide it is, so I must wish and pray that others will acknowledge the actual truth, even when their worldviews incline them to error. Jesus really is the King of Kings and not just my King. His guidance for life really is good guidance for every life, not just for those who confess him. In embracing civic pluralism, we are voluntarily embracing the circumstance that a diversity of views and ways of life will be legally protected and that much that we are sure is wrong will be recommended and urged on others.

To be sure, civic pluralism emphatically does not require anyone to be silent about what they believe the truth is. And it does not require us to let all errors be protected. Slavery is wrong. We need not try to have a nation which is half free and half enslaved. What else is a wrong like that, which must be driven out rather than be legally protected? And what are the grave errors that we should put up with, even though it grieves us that others refuse the truth and are settling for distorted relationships and lives that fall short of what they could be?

--

Thus “proximate” pluralism. The term “proximate” here indicates not that we should quiet our disappointments by knowing that, while our civic pluralism isn’t as perfect as it can be, in the new heavens and the new earth there will be an even more perfect civic or principled pluralism! No, when Jesus returns those underlying confessional divisions will be gone: we will all worship the Lamb who was slain, but now sits on the throne. We will all be illuminated by the light of the Lord God, we will all live next to the river of life. We will all know what is good and true and it will be everyone’s heart’s desire to obey. There will be no deep diversity of religions in society, no required civic pluralism for government, even though there will be cultural diversity and multiple spheres.

No, we should call it “proximate” pluralism to acknowledge that, while it is a great good given the divisions in our political communities, we are right to be saddened by those divisions, by seeing people choose pathways we are sure are not good for them, and by all of the practical compromises we must make to live in peace with our neighbors, in this time before the full arrival of the Kingdom of God.

In a pair of articles, Jonathan Chaplin fully acknowledges the deep frustrations each community of conviction must accept because many of our fellow citizens, and our pluralist democracy, do not adopt the conclusions, goals, and policies that our respective convictions about justice and truth entail. Christians are a political minority; more, Christians are not unified concerning political perspectives and goals. Yet political minorities are not doomed to impotence, despite civic pluralism, he argues. We should be glad for civic pluralism as a setting within which Christians should adopt and model a commitment to persuading others and to a patient pursuit of justice.

Christians—and all others! —who step into public office, however, must and should accept strong limits on how far they push to advance the particular perspectives of their own group. As office

holders—executive, legislative, or judicial—they are stewards of the civic pluralist system itself, a system that, albeit imperfectly, affords both freedom and security to all of the diverse and divergent groups. This stewardly obligation, Jennifer Walsh says, is both required by the rules of our political community and urged by biblical teaching and exemplars (unless the system itself is generating manifest evil and blocks any opportunity for reform). Yet neither citizens nor public servants, however convinced of the justice of their cause, should lightly undermine a functioning government, given the great good that it brings in our polarized and broken world.

No political community can tolerate and protect every kind of confessional or value pluralism: there has to be some agreement, at least on the rules for living together, and—we hope and pray—on many substantive matters, too: no to slavery, human trafficking, the abuse of children; yes to policies to overcome entrenched poverty, prevent environmental degradation, and promote education for all. And yet it is a fundamental commitment of civic pluralism that public policies should protect the deep differences of conviction, and even most of the divergent practices, of different religions and philosophical systems. If civic pluralism protects anything, it protects religious freedom, understood expansively. But religious exercise isn't just religious worship but encompasses religion-inspired different ways of doing things: different ways to raise children, variant understandings of human sexuality and intimate relationships, alternate understandings of what good health care is and which economic practices are acceptable, and more.

How much of those variations must civic pluralism accept as part of its commitment to protect religious freedom? How much of those variations must it seek to accept in upholding or advancing the principle of equality? And when there is friction at the intersection of the two, does civic pluralism provide insight into what justice requires? Nathan Berkeley challenges us to think about this difficult question by reflecting on the charged and complex issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In the final article in this series, Jesse Covington encourages us to be neither faint-hearted nor Pollyannaish in considering civic pluralism and charting a course of faithfulness to God amid the fractures of our time. We can learn from St. Augustine, who reflected, multiple centuries ago, about how the City of God and the City of Man are simultaneously opposed and interrelated. Civic pluralism is an undisputed human political good though it protects not only practices that accord with Shalom but also other practices that fall far short. It is a good because it enables diverse communities to live together peacefully, but more: it is a good because it gives us the freedom—though with no guarantees of success—to work with energy and patience and persistence to convince our fellow citizens and public servants to accept our vision of Shalom and to join with us to pursue what we are sure is the path toward God-pleasing justice.

To respond to the author of this article please email 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.