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Civic Pluralism and Minority Solidarity

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In the previous article, I explored some of the implications for the understanding and practice of civic pluralism of our solidarity as fellow creatures with others – of what we share in common with our fellow citizens. In this article I consider some of the implications for civic pluralism of how we differ from our fellow citizens – of finding ourselves as one among a plurality of minorities of conviction within the same political community to which we are all bound.

Let me reiterate the “dilemma” of civic pluralism as summarized by Stanley Carlson-Thies in his introductory piece. When Christians endorse civic pluralism, he noted, “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.”

In the previous article, I explored the implications of the fact that some of what is “urged” by others will also be “imposed” legally on society via legitimate democratic processes. Civic pluralism thus protects wide areas of pluralistic freedom for Christians and other communities of conviction while also allowing for the uniform imposition of *some* political convictions on *all*. Like any state, a civic-pluralist state simply *has* to impose *some* uniform laws, and some of those will inevitably collide with at least some of the deepest political convictions of some minority communities. The dilemma is constitutive not only of civic pluralism but of political community itself.

“We are all minorities now”

The theme I want to pursue here is that this dilemma is confronted by every conscientious citizen in a society that is both (to some degree) pluralistic and (more or less) democratic. It applies, then, to every American citizen. Our attitude toward civic pluralism needs to be shaped by a recognition that, increasingly, we are all minorities now. In proposing that we need to stand “in solidarity with” other such minorities, I do not mean we should affirm the substance of – and still less “celebrate” – their

political or religious convictions. Rather, I mean the norm of public justice calls us to defend the same political space and legal protection for them that we expect for ourselves.

In fact, public justice demands even more. Where certain minorities (religious, ethnic, national, sexual) experience substantial marginalization from the political process or suffer illicit or disproportionate inhibitions on their convictional freedom, Christians should go out of their way to rally to these people's defense, even when they themselves feel (rightly or wrongly) that they too are one of those marginalized minorities.

Put yourself in the shoes of, for example, someone committed to a radical ecological vision of society as well as to some form of civic pluralism. She will frequently be confronted with laws that permit or encourage behaviors (climate change-inducing air pollution, for example) or structures (such as models of corporate governance that thwart stakeholder dissent) that she finds personally repugnant and judges as publicly damaging. The secular libertarian economic convictions deployed to justify such outcomes have, it seems, won the day in the forum of democratic pluralism for now – a forum our conscientious green citizen herself champions.

Our green fellow citizen thus has her own reasons for regret and lament at this outcome of civic pluralism (incidentally, more and more of those “green citizens” are also Christians, and they are green because they are Christian).

Minority status and the temptation of democratic despair

It's revealing to note here that frustrated environmental campaigners and sympathetic elected officials occasionally confess, tongue-in-cheek, to being lured by the temptation of “being China for a day” – of being able to wield sufficient authoritarian power to “fix” environmental problems by decree, rather than being bogged down in the costly, soul-destroying labyrinth of democratic process. In the face of out-of-control, potentially calamitous environmental degradation, we can see why. If it's a choice between upholding convictional diversity and saving the planet, democratic pluralism seems like a luxury we can't afford.

We hardly need reminding that impatience with democratic persuasion is evident at all points on the political spectrum. In 2016, many American citizens, including many professedly “Evangelical” Christians, found themselves deeply resentful at the unjust “capture” of the federal government by “liberal elites” bent on destroying “their” culture” and leaving them languishing economically in “rustbelts” (and not all of that analysis is false). Seeing no conventional democratic solutions at hand, they threw in their lot with an outsider with no democratic credentials or instincts at all – a noxious, narcissistic bully promising to “fix” America's problems quickly through a series of smart business “deals” (or grandiose executive orders) – rather than engaging in the slow, painstaking task of democratic reasoning and coalition-building.

Disturbingly, the same authoritarian temptation has long been sweeping across much of Europe. Regimes in Russia and Turkey succumbed to it years ago, and Hungary and Poland are following hard behind.

Despair at the possibility of advancing justice through the patient work of political persuasion is a real risk in any democracy, particularly one that is culturally and philosophically polarized. Such a risk

escalates to dangerous levels when a supposed “democracy” is actually highly unrepresentative, unresponsive, and corrupted by special interests – a parlous state of affairs in American democracy that goes some way to explaining why so many were seduced into supporting the manifestly unsuitable candidacy of Donald Trump.

Disappointment at the deferral or defeat of one’s own cherished goals of justice is a challenge to every citizen, not just Christians. In fact, in this respect civic pluralism presents *no unique challenges to Christians at all*. We are simply one of many minority communities of conviction who, at some point or other, must come to terms with and respond imaginatively – and democratically – to that disappointment.

Reading our “minority status” Christianly

If Christians are in the same boat as everyone else in this regard, we must, however, seek to interpret that state of affairs in an authentically Christian way. Before we act, we must first “see” politics faithfully. That includes learning how to interpret the circumstance of minority status in a Christian way. Among other things, this requires learning the meaning of “patience,” which, biblically, does not at all mean being “passive,” but rather remaining actively hopeful and obedient both in disappointment and success – or in that grey, misty area in the middle where many of us find ourselves much of the time, straining our eyes to pick out the right path.

Being faithful under conditions of civic pluralism, then, requires us to recognize our solidarity with many of our fellow citizens in facing the challenges of our common minority status, and so to renounce any lingering sense of Christian “specialness.” We are not sole or privileged, still less “elect,” custodians of the justice of our political systems. Under civic pluralism, fidelity mandates humility.

But Christians do have distinctive gifts to offer; this, too, is part of what it means to read our minority status Christianly. We have access to a long and deep history, containing examples both of faithful, creative political practice and of dreadful political injustice. In reflecting critically – and, I argued in the previous article, corporately – on that legacy, we can become more discerning and courageous campaigners for justice and more effective practitioners of civic pluralism. Chastened by that self-critical learning process, we will be in a better position to share our insights with our fellow citizens.

Yet we may also offer those insights boldly, espousing what John Inazu calls a “[confident pluralism](#)” – the vigorous projection of our deepest political convictions into the democratic arena while simultaneously defending the equal right of others to do the same.

We should therefore decline the advice of [commentators](#) such as Rod Dreher, who suggest that the prospects for Christian political influence have today become so diminished that we should engage in a strategic retreat to ecclesial communities or faith-based voluntary associations in which true virtue can again be nourished – later, perhaps, to re-engage with national politics if circumstances become more propitious.

While I echo many of Dreher’s concerns about the quality of our public life, I do not think that is the form of biblical patience to which we are called today. Rather, as James Bratt sums up [Abraham Kuyper’s pluralism](#), we should wherever possible continue to “bring the full weight of our convictions” into public life, while upholding the equal right of others to bring the full weight of theirs and while

actively protecting the wider democratic forums that allow us all to practice “conviction politics.” We should do this *as well as* building strong ecclesial communities and faith-based organizations to cultivate distinctively Christian virtues.

How might we proceed in this task?

Civic pluralism, public justice and the norm of prudence

The initial step in considering any attempt at Christian political change is to identify that a public issue we are concerned about really does fall within the remit of the state (this would be true, incidentally, even in the absence of convictional pluralism). This requires addressing two linked questions.

The first is whether the issue at stake is indeed an issue of “justice.” Not everything that damages society amounts to an “injustice.” It might be some other kind of harm, such as, for example, a decline in the quality and stability of friendship. This is a deeply regrettable relational deficiency, but it is not an “injustice” (no-one has a “right” to friendship), and so it requires other kinds of redress beyond the authority and capacity of the state. The second is whether the injustice in question is “public” in scope; not every issue of injustice threatens the public good and thus requires state action. The granting of a prestigious art award for what is in fact an inferior piece of art might be a genuine injustice, one that damages the career of the superior competitor, but it is not a public matter mandating the intervention of the state.

Yet having determined that the issue at stake does indeed qualify as a matter of “public justice” and thus falls within the remit of the state, our task of discerning what actions then to take is far from over. We still have to reach a variety of complex, prudential judgments about available political possibilities, strategies and tactics.

For, as often as not, the campaigns for political or legal change we Christians devise, launch, or simply support, pursuant to our passionate convictions about issues of justice, seem to run into the ground. Frequently, our clear-eyed, expertly-researched, widely-endorsed proposals as to what must be done by the state to address such issues are delayed, diluted, thwarted, or defeated, even on the rare occasions when the democratic processes we utilize seem largely fair and transparent.

To respond to such circumstances faithfully, we will need to have *already undergone* long-term practices of personal and corporate spiritual formation that can equip us to bear political disappointment with proper biblical “patience.” These practices of formation will be another essential item on the agenda of the process of “corporate hermeneutics” I spoke of in the previous article. Fortified by such practices, we can begin together to develop criteria of prudential discernment in the face of such setbacks.

We will, for example, need to reach the following kinds of judgment (and this list is far from comprehensive):

- whether to press on despite defeat and delay, or to accept that a plurality of different views and practices will, at least for now, be the rule;
- whether to rethink, suspend, or scrap our campaigning efforts, and more broadly how to deploy our finite resources of people, time, money, and reputation;

- whether to shift our strategic focus from the immediate political goals of campaigning and law reform to the longer-term cultural challenges of education and persuasion, and/or to the diaconal task of care for the victims of the objectionable law or policy;
- what is the actual or potential level of democratic support for – and opposition to – our proposal, and who now are our best political allies;
- what are the prospects of getting legislators behind our proposal and what sort of procedural obstacles might it face if they do;
- whether we are better off seeking change at a local or state level rather than at the federal level;
- whether the prospects for success are more likely to come via judicial initiative, influencing legislators, or large-scale democratic mobilization.

Here it is essential to keep in mind that we do not leave normative reflection behind at this point. “Prudence” has always been regarded in the Christian tradition as itself a highly important normative question, not the point at which “pragmatism” takes over from “idealism.” It is the “virtue” of discerning right action, *in the particular circumstances one finds oneself in*. Paul offers a hint of it in Romans 12:18 (interestingly, just before he sets out his theology of government in chapter 13: 1-7). Tantalizingly, he simply counsels the believing minority in Rome: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (NRSV). Cryptic as it is, that’s not a throwaway line but a profound capsule of theological wisdom on what we can call the “providential faithfulness” of the church (but how often have you heard it preached on?). Nor is it a counsel of passivity or acquiescence. It is a summons to the church to seek, corporately, the wisdom to live righteously within the constraints and possibilities of the historical moment that God has placed it today.

Civic pluralism and Christian solidarity

Speaking of that process of corporate discernment, it turns out that there is, after all, a *third* sense of solidarity that should inform our engagements with the possibilities and limits of civic pluralism: solidarity among *Christians*.

On all the questions I listed above – whether a public issue qualifies as a matter of “public justice” and what judgments of “prudence” we should reach on whether, and if so how, to address it – Christians will, often legitimately, take different views. Frequently, however, Christians fall into the temptation of hurling unfair and uncharitable accusations against fellow believers who reach different judgments on such questions. But Christians may simply deeply disagree, conscientiously and after deep reflection, with their fellow believers’ readings of public justice (or some similar norm, such as the “common good”).

While regrettable, that is not in itself a failing. But it is a failing to disregard the distinction between being committed to some clear public principle (such as the right to life or the alleviation of poverty) and the complex prudential questions involved in pursuing it politically. Thus, Christians all too easily accuse those who, in the face of defeat or deferral, opt to take stock and pull back, of “compromise,” of “throwing in the towel,” or, worse, of “betrayal.” Or, they charge those who opt to press ahead in the face of seemingly unsurmountable obstacles as “absolutist,” “dogmatic,” or “theocratic.”

One of the most difficult issues on which such differences are currently playing themselves out is the question of how Christian institutions will respond to attempts by the state to impose on them “non-

discrimination” norms, which force them to choose between upholding their considered convictions (about sexual ethics, for instance) and maintaining their public recognition (even their existence). [The recent Supreme Court of Canada ruling against Trinity Western’s freedom to require students on its new law program to accept the college’s long-established values statement](#), is a particularly worrying instance of this imposition. In response, that Christian institution altered its Community Covenant. This in turn elicited a torrent of criticism from fellow Christians, including all of the charges listed in the above paragraph: compromise, throwing in the towel, betrayal. Thankfully, wiser and more generously-spirited commentators, including [seasoned practitioners both of authentically Christian education and of robust civic pluralism](#), have read the institution’s decision as one bearing the marks of what I earlier called “providential faithfulness.” That can be done irrespectively of whether we agree with the specific decisions made in these cases like this.

Wider North American (and European) experience suggests that realizing political solidarity among Christians is the toughest of all the challenges of the project of corporate Christian political discernment. Wherever we are, we need to take whatever steps are available to us to promote the healing of our politically sundered Christian communities – such as the risky and not wholly successful [gathering at Wheaton College](#) in April 2018 of Evangelicals to reflect on the movement’s deeply divided responses to President Trump. Such initiatives could start as small as a discussion group in a local church or a Christian college.

The goal of such initiatives is not political unanimity but, first of all, *ecclesial integrity*. It is vital to the public credibility of the Gospel that Christians, when they disagree, *disagree well*. Yet it remains the case that ecclesial integrity can only be won on the basis of fearless statements of the truth – platitudinous or evasive statements of supposed “unity” are worse than silence. In my view, one such fearless statement was the [speech by Fuller Seminary President Mark Labberton](#) at the Wheaton event. Others might propose different examples. More than ever today, Christian political solidarity, where it does break out, will be a hard-won achievement, requiring a degree of truthfulness, grace, mutual correction, and repentance which, sadly, is only rarely seen in the church.

Such steps may, perhaps, begin to offer the prospect of a recovery of Christian ecclesial solidarity about civic pluralism – an acceptance of a mutually respectful diversity of prudential judgments among Christians about the goals, aims and limits of political action in conditions of deep convictional diversity and escalating tribal animosity. Modeling such respect, Christians might, in time, even begin to win a hearing in wider public debates about the conditions for a civic solidarity without which pluralism risks descending permanently into fragmentation and recrimination. That is, they might become witnesses to what it means, politically, to affirm our solidarity as human beings equally made in the image of God.

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