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The Social Justice Wars: Where does Public Justice Fit?

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During my PhD studies in the 1960s, most of the courses and seminars that I took were in social-political philosophy. We read and discussed many writings on justice, but I don't recall anyone ever using the phrase "public justice." Nor did that phrase ever show up when in 1973 a group of us gathered to issue the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concerns. Issues of justice were certainly on our minds at that gathering. In committing ourselves to combating racism, militarism and poverty, we deplored the failures of the evangelical movement to work for justice in the larger society. And in elaborating on our understanding of that failure, we typically referred to God's concern for "*social justice*."

These days I am much more inclined to insist on the importance of *public* justice. In part this has to do with a terminological shift that has occurred over few decades in the world of Christian scholarship. When I began teaching and writing about social and political topics, I followed the pattern at the time of identifying my field as "Christian social ethics." During that period the World Council regularly sponsored consultations on "church and society," and shortly after that seminaries began offering courses in "political theology." Those designations have not disappeared, but many scholars have chosen to pay more attention to "public" topics, insisting that we need this label to focus on matters that are not covered adequately by focusing simply on the "ethical," the "social" and the "political."

The current "Me Too" movement in the United States offers an interesting case in point. Much of the recent publicity about the abusive treatment of women has been about workplace patterns in TV journalism and film production. In one sense, the stories have been about professional relationships—the misuse of power by executives and industry "stars." But, as many have begun to point out, effective reform cannot be limited to practices and policies in cable television and Hollywood studios. There are connections to gender relations in Congressional offices, in academic settings, in Wall Street offices, in homes and taxi cabs. It is a broadly "public" concern.

The Center for Public Justice, then, is in tune with this emphasis on a broad arena for discussion. But for those of us who support and associate with the Center, our focus on “public” life also has to do with a specific way of understanding what it means to promote human flourishing, and of the role of the state in promoting that flourishing. And this kind of consideration figures importantly into how we understand the distinction between social and public justice.

The Center’s Mission Statement calls attention to the fact that because “God’s call to do justice extends to the whole world,” we are obligated to “recognize the manifold and distinct responsibilities within human society.” In explaining the implication of this way of viewing things, David Koyzis has remarked that while he is supportive of the commitments to social justice in many undergraduate students that he knows, he does find it necessary to draw some important distinctions, as they have been set forth by his friend (and mine!) Gideon Strauss. [When an interviewer once asked Gideon](#) to explain the terms “justice,” “public justice” and “social justice, he gave this reply:

In the biggest sense, justice is when all God’s creatures receive what is due them and contribute out of their uniqueness to our common existence. We are called to do justice in every sphere of our lives: how I love and educate my daughters, collaborate with my colleagues, interact with neighbors. Public justice is the political aspect—the work of citizens and political office bearers shaping a public life for the common good. Social justice is the civil society counterpart—nonpolitical organizations that promote justice.

Gideon rightly emphasizes in that comment the importance of promoting justice within specific areas of human life. Individuals who are seeking careers in TV journalism, or who are serving as altar boys in Catholic liturgies or working as servers in restaurants—all of these deserve to receive what is “due” to them as persons of created value. It is necessary for people within each of those areas of human interaction to be advocating on their behalf against abusive practices.

Efforts at promoting justice within each of those areas, however, will be most effective when they occur in a general societal climate shaped by active patterns of public justice. This aspect isn’t simply about crafting legislation—although the need for laws is often a necessity in guaranteeing that individuals get their “due” in specific areas of civil society. But as Gideon Strauss nicely puts it, public justice also requires “shaping a public life for the common good.”

The 17th century Scottish Calvinist writers had an interesting image for describing this “shaping” role of the state. They said that a political leader was called by God to be a “nursing father.” They took that image from the Bible, drawing upon a couple of passages in the King James Version of the Old Testament, where the metaphor of breast-feeding is applied to political leadership: “And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers” (49: 23); “Thou... shalt suck the breast of kings” (60: 16).

These are not the best sorts of texts to base sermons on today! But they do point to an important biblical theme. God wants governments to have a *nurturing* role. That idea shows up with a different image in Psalm 72, where the psalmist describes a righteous king who cares so much about the poor and the needy that his patterns of leadership “shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth” (v. 6).

While we do not live today under Old Testament type monarchies, we can nonetheless apply the nurturing image to our own patterns of political life. Governments must care about the well-being of all citizens in the complex relationships of contemporary life, by—to repeat Gideon Strauss’s formula about public justice--“shaping a public life for the common good.”

This “shaping” role means more than wanting a government simply to step into our lives on occasion with specific legislation. It requires active attention on the part of the state to the overall contours of our life together as citizens. And this means seeing to it that the various institutions and associations of civil society are able to flourish.

Abraham Kuyper—the patron saint of many of us who advocate for public justice issues in these pages—recognized the need for government to actively promote the common good. And for Kuyper this meant that governments have an obligation to encourage and sustain a flourishing civil society. Family life, the arts, farming, business pursuits, manufacturing, church life—these important spheres of human activity must be allowed to flourish without unnecessary state interference. They do not exist, he said, by the permission of the state. Rather, they are important elements in God’s complex design for his creation. “The State may never become an octopus,” [he wrote](#), “which stifles the whole of life.”

That did not mean for Kuyper, though, that governments should simply take a *laissez faire* posture with reference to these other spheres. A government has, he said, a “threefold right and duty” in fostering a vibrant civil society. First, the state must adjudicate disputes between spheres, maintaining “the boundary-lines of each.” Right now, in Southern California families are complaining that GPS systems—Google Maps and the like—are directing commuter and commercial traffic to exit heavily trafficked freeways to make their way through what have been quiet neighborhoods where children play and folks ride bicycles on streets with low speed limits. The result is increased dangers to the residents.

To want a government to attend to the diverse needs of families in residential communities, harried drivers during rush hours, and companies providing satellite-generated navigation services is not to encourage “big government”—it is to take seriously the state’s obligation to work for the common good by having to make Solomonic decisions in dealing with competing interests.

The second “right and duty” is to defend the weak against the strong within specific spheres of human relationships. The state has to promote an environment where children, spouses, employees, consumers and others feel safe from abusive and manipulative actions and practices.

And then the third function: to see to it, [Kuyper says](#), that citizens “bear *personal* and *financial* burdens for the maintenance of the natural unity of the State.” Taxation is necessary for maintaining streets and highways, public parks, educational opportunities, police and military protection, and so on.

Obviously, there are legitimate arguments that can be generated here about how a state goes about these three functions. Are these “rights and duties” the business of national governments or more regional bodies? What services should be expected by all citizens and what is appropriate only for “safety nets” for the truly needy? What are the limits of what a government can rightly do in promoting human flourishing?

The role of the arts in human society is an interesting case in point. The ways in which, for example, the Soviet state tightly controlled artistic activity were clearly evil. Subordinating the arts to producing political propaganda is always a bad thing. On the positive side of things, there should be no question that a robust culture requires galleries, concert halls, museums, art-education programs, and venues for encouraging artistic collaboration.

Should the state use tax funds for actively providing many of these things? Should governments support the livelihood of gifted artists? Should state-supported schools provide art education and extracurricular artistic activity (for example, drama programs, marching bands, school orchestras) regardless of whether taxpayers recognize the importance of such things? Those are good questions to discuss, and at the very least political officials who care about the common good ought want to see to it that these discussions are happening.

The role of the state in promoting the overall shape of public justice needs continual attention by people who care about the common good. But none of this should divert attention to the more focused concerns about social justice. Often, as has been the case with the civil rights reforms in the United States over the past half-century, this will require active remedial legislation focusing on schools, public transportation, and voting rights. In other contexts, however, we can look for changing attitudes and protections *within* a given area of collective life. The sustained attention given in recent months to abuse by film producers by aspiring actresses, for example, has called for changes that have not automatically required legislative actions.

What a focus on social justice does require, in any case, is advocacy by citizens who take their social responsibilities seriously. The call for this advocacy comes clearly to Christians. The God of the Bible hears the cries of those who are helpless before the structures of power, and that God calls us also to hear those cries and to speak and act as agents of God's righteousness in taking up the cause of the marginalized.

To call us as citizens within various spheres of societal life to advocate for social justice is to acknowledge that it is not the task of the state alone to facilitate justice in the diverse spheres. This means that whether it is necessary for the state *directly* to facilitate social justice within this or that area of human interaction—in the arts, or in family life, or in film studios—is something that is typically open to legitimate debate. Not all obligations to do justice are obligations for direct action on the part of the state. What is a unique obligation of the state is to monitor and maintain the overall patterns of public justice, with the recognition that not all efforts to maintain the public good require direct *political* action.

As citizens of a democracy we cannot be detached from how governments go about the tasks of promoting social and public justice. As participants in “we the people”—the basic social bonds that have led human beings to form states and to delegate the authority to implement laws and practices—our citizenship means that we are ourselves engaged in the patterns of government. For us to advocate for both healthy patterns of public life and the cause of justice within specific spheres of human interaction is, for us, to honor the Creator's desire that we maintain political systems that “come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth.”

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