



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

THE SACRED SECTOR AND PUBLIC JUSTICE: DIVERSITY IN THE PUBLIC  
SQUARE

VOL. 10, ISSUE 1, 2020

## Article Two: Principled Pluralism: Essential to Advancing a Flourishing Faith-Based Nonprofit Sector

**Dr. Stanley Carlson-Thies** is the founder and senior director of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance (IRFA), a division of the Center for Public Justice. As part of this role, he convenes the Coalition to Preserve Religious Freedom, a multi-faith alliance of social-service, education, and religious freedom organizations that advocates for the religious freedom of faith-based organizations to Congress and the federal government. In addition he is also a Senior Fellow at the Canadian think tank Cardus. Previously, he was director of social policy studies for CPJ and directed CPJ's project to track the implementation and impact of the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 federal welfare reform law. He served with the White House Office of Faith-Based & Community Initiatives from its inception in February 2001 until mid-May 2002. Following his term in the White House, he returned to CPJ as the director of faith-based policy studies. He received the William Bentley Ball Life and Religious Liberty Defense Award from the Center for Law and Religious Freedom and the Christian Legal Society in October 2004, and holds a doctorate in political science from the University of Toronto. In May 2019, Carlson-Thies received the Religious Liberty Dinner National Award from the North American Religious Liberty Association (NARLA), *Liberty* magazine, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The late **Stephen V. Monsma** served as a senior research fellow at the Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics at Calvin College and professor emeritus of political science at Pepperdine University. Dr. Monsma taught at Calvin University in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before serving in both the Michigan House of Representatives (1974-1978) and Senate (1978-1982). He taught at Pepperdine from 1987 to 2004, and along the way served on the boards of Bread for the World and the Center for Public Justice, among other organizations. Stephen was a scholar who combined his experience in policy-making and politics with a deeply biblical vision of public justice. He was especially concerned with how government might partner with civil society to advance the social welfare of the least advantaged. Dr. Monsma's writings have been published widely in the fields of church-state relations and faith-based nonprofit organizations.

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### Editor's Note:

*This article is an excerpt from the book Free to Serve, authored by Stanley Carlson-Thies and the late Stephen Monsma, and has been edited for brevity and clarity. Free to Serve was published by Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Copyright 2015 by Stephen V. Monsma and Stanley Carlson-Thies. This excerpt has been shared with permission of the publisher.*

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**Abstract:** A vision of religious freedom for all is one where persons of all religious faiths, and of none, are free not only to worship or refrain from worship as their beliefs require, but also free to live out their faith as citizens active in the public life of the nation and in the faith-based organizations they have formed. This vision for our nation is based on a commitment to religious freedom, pluralism, and tolerance.

The result is a pluralist society: one where Catholics, evangelicals, Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, nonbelievers, and others are free to live as citizens, health care providers, businesspeople, social-service providers, and public officials as led by their religious or nonreligious beliefs. Pluralism says that diversity such as this is to be expected in a free society and pluralism requires tolerance. Imposed uniformity is the opposite of freedom, pluralism, and tolerance, and we seek common ground where the beliefs, practices, and organizations of those of all faiths and of none are respected and their freedoms protected. Furthermore, a public realm that respects the diversity of belief and practice present in American society is ideal, rather than one that favors one group's beliefs and practices over those of others.

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At the outset we need to describe our vision of religious freedom for all. It is one where persons of all religious faiths and of none are free not only to worship or refrain from worship as their beliefs require, but also free to live out their faith as citizens active in the public life of the nation and in the faith-based organizations they have formed. In this vision, society acknowledges and respects the wide diversity of religious and nonreligious belief systems, perspectives, and organizations. None is favored; none is disfavored. This is where we take our stand.

This vision for our nation is based on a commitment to religious freedom, pluralism, and tolerance. We chose those words carefully. Religious freedom means, as we just stated, that persons of all religious faiths and of none are free to believe and to act on those beliefs—in their lives as private individuals, as citizens active in the public realm, and as members of organizations of like-minded believers.

This will result in a pluralist society, one where Catholics, evangelicals, Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, nonbelievers, and others are free to live as citizens, health care providers, businesspersons, social-service providers, and public officials as led by their religious or nonreligious beliefs. This means there will be faith-based organizations—and sometimes businesses—that differ widely: some colleges will be thoroughly secular in nature, others will be deeply rooted in a particular religious tradition; some health clinics will offer birth control, sterilizations, and abortions, others will refuse to offer any of these.

Pluralism says that diversity such as this is to be expected in a free society. Pluralism requires tolerance. We must indeed be free to believe deeply and debate vigorously, yet we also need to learn anew to live with, respect, and make room in our public policies for our fellow citizens with



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whom we have deep differences—and for the organizations they have formed to live out or express their faiths. An imposed uniformity is the opposite of freedom, pluralism, and tolerance. We do not seek a victory of one side or the other in what has been called religious culture wars. Rather, we seek common ground where the beliefs, practices, and organizations of those of all faiths and of none are respected and their freedoms protected. This means that... our goal is not to privilege our own tradition and its beliefs. We are pledged to defend as vigorously the religious freedom rights of our Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, mainline Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and nonbelieving fellow citizens as we do our own. We seek a public realm that respects the diversity of belief and practice present in American society, not one that favors one group's beliefs and practices over those of others. We believe, as previously stated, in a public square marked by religious freedom, pluralism, and tolerance.

We recognize there are few problems today with the freedom of religious congregations to celebrate their faith by way of prayers, religious services, and the rituals of their faith. There are also few problems with persons and families living out their various faiths as individuals in the privacy of their own homes. Problems arise, however, when deeply religious persons—in obedience to their faith—put that faith into practice in the world beyond the privacy of their homes or the four walls of their houses of worship. When persons seek to faithfully follow their religious beliefs in the public realms of health care, education, and services to the needy—and sometimes their businesses—and when they form organizations to do so, their religiously-based practices are increasingly called into question. This is when religious freedom problems arise.

Our concerns, however, are also based on the huge role that faith-based schools, hospitals and health clinics, and charitable organizations play in American society. One of the foremost scholars of nonprofit organizations, Lester Salamon of Johns Hopkins University, has reported that nonprofit organizations are crucial in the provision of social welfare and many other services such as health care, education, international aid, and the arts. He has also documented a less well-known fact: “Religious institutions are near the epicenter of American philanthropy: they absorb well over half of all private charitable contributions, and account for a disproportionate share of the private voluntary effort. . . . No account of the United States nonprofit sector would therefore be complete without some attention to the religious institutions the sector also contains.”

Michael O'Neill, professor emeritus at the University of San Francisco, has stated: “Religion is a large and important part of the nonprofit sector and has given birth to many other nonprofit institutions: health, education, social services, international assistance, advocacy, mutual assistance, and even some cultural and grant-making organizations. Directly and indirectly, religion has been the major formative influence on American's independent sector.” Our pluralist vision of society equally respects and welcomes into the public life of the nation the wide diversity of religious and nonreligious beliefs, perspectives, and organizations. Both faith-based organizations and secular organizations have every right to enter the public realm, and—more important—they have a right to do so as religious or secular entities. Faith-based



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organizations should be free to serve as religious organizations true to their faith's tradition and not be squeezed into a secular mold, just as secular organizations should not be required to engage in religious activities, even of a very broad, generic nature. As intimated at various points, this is what we favor. It is time to look more closely at this third option, one we have termed "principled pluralism."

### Principled Pluralism: Its Basic Tenets

Principled pluralism rejects both a secularized public square and a religious—or a Christianized—public square in favor of a pluralist public square. Our vision is of an America in which we live together in tolerance and mutual respect notwithstanding our differences of race, color, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. This vision means our public policies must reflect and accommodate this tolerance and mutual respect.

Principled pluralism thereby rejects both government-enforced secularism and any kind of theocracy (government enforced adherence to a religion). Principled pluralism accepts the reality that our society is filled with diverse and sometimes clashing belief systems, both religious and secular in nature. We as a people follow different faiths; our consciences are formed in different ways.

Diversity, to a greater or lesser degree, has always characterized the United States, and our system of religious freedom has always been a prime principle enabling us to live together with our deepest differences. Principled pluralism renews and clarifies this fundamental principle of American respect and tolerance. Principled pluralism—or "civic pluralism" as it is sometimes called—is a political principle, a design for how a diverse people can live together in one political system. It requires neither that we agree completely with each other about our deepest beliefs (we don't) nor that we stop trying to convince each other about what we think is best (we shouldn't). Instead, principled pluralism simply asks us to agree to respect each other's convictions not only in private life but also in public life. Just as we ask for freedom to live our lives according to our convictions, we believe others with different convictions should be free to live their lives according to their convictions.

This means the public realm, our common life, will be neither Christian nor secular. The public realm ought not to privilege those of us who hold to Christian beliefs (or those of other religious traditions). Nor should secularism be imposed on all by banishing religion to the private world of congregational worship and personal devotions. Doing so would show little respect for people of faith—people for whom faith is relevant not only for worship, but also for how they educate their children, heal the sick, serve the needy, and run a business. People of faith would then not be treated in a neutral, evenhanded manner. But the answer to such favoring of secularism cannot be to favor those with religious convictions and their organizations. That too is wrong.



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Central to our position is the basic fact that a thoroughly secular world does not occupy neutral ground between belief and nonbelief. Instead, a nonreligious, secular perspective is a distinctive perspective, or worldview, that is in competition with religious perspectives. Political scientist A. James Reichley was exactly correct when he once wrote, “Banishment of religion does not represent neutrality between religion and secularism; conduct of public institutions without any acknowledgment of religion is secularism.” This means a thoroughly secularized public realm has taken sides in the contest between religious and nonreligious organizations and their differing views of life and the world.

This is why principled pluralism not only seeks public policies that are evenhanded among the faith-based organizations of various religious traditions but also between faith-based organizations and secular organizations. Neither should be favored over the other.

We have referred to our position as being principled pluralism because there are indeed certain basic, underlying principles or tenets relating to human beings, society, and democratic freedom that are at its core. Four are particularly important. Principled pluralism’s first underlying tenet is that all human beings are morally responsible, free individuals who possess human dignity and certain fundamental rights, the most basic of which is freedom of religion. We selected our words carefully here. Freedom of religion has been referred to as our “first freedom” for more reasons than its appearing first in the Bill of Rights. The freedom of religious belief and practice is fundamental because it involves the deepest of human beliefs and practices—those that define who we are as persons. Freedom of religious belief and practice includes both what is often referred to as freedom of conscience and the free exercise of one’s religious beliefs. This hardly sounds revolutionary to American ears, yet it is fundamental to the other three tenets of principled pluralism.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition—which is a deep source of our American values—the basis for human rights is the creation of all men and women by God in his image. This means they possess an inherent, God-given human dignity. This idea is made explicit in the Declaration of Independence’s famous words, “All men [and women] are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” James Madison, in his famous “Memorial and Remonstrance,” insisted that among these unalienable rights is freedom of religion:

*“We hold it for a fundamental and undeniable truth, ‘that religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence.’ The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right.”*

But principled pluralism does not stop here. There is more. Its second tenet is that although human beings are individuals, with individual rights and responsibilities, human beings are also social beings. We are made to live together in communities, not to live as separate, isolated



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individuals. The secluded hermit living off in a wilderness area by himself is an aberration, not the norm. That is why all societies down through the ages have been marked by families, clans, tribes, neighborhoods, and other social organizations.

American society is, in fact, composed of a wide variety of organizations such as churches, synagogues, and mosques, for-profit businesses, and a wide range of nonprofit service organizations, clubs, and associations. Often we come together in organizations that reflect a particular way of accomplishing some action. One scholar has estimated there are some 1.6 million nonprofit organizations in the United States.

There are churches of an astounding variety of denominations; Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox synagogues; and mosques of varying natures. There also are drug-treatment agencies that follow differing drug treatment approaches, universities guided by secular or religious frameworks, and for-profit businesses that only offer “fair trade” goods and give much of their profits to marriage equality groups or that instead close on Sundays and give much of the profits to community religious groups.

This leads to a third basic tenet of principled pluralism: For a society to be truly free its government must not prevent its members from being able to create and sustain nongovernmental organizations that are based on and reflect their members deeply held beliefs. A free society is one where persons are able—without smothering governmental coercion or interference—to form organizations that are rooted in and able to act on their freely decided beliefs and goals. This includes all types of secular and religiously based organizations.

Normally, men and women form their religious beliefs and then live out those beliefs not as isolated individuals but as members of families, religious congregations, charitable organizations, and more. That is why throughout this book we have made the point that for there truly to be religious freedom, religiously based organizations must be free. It is within them that believers come to faith and follow the demands of their faith. It is within churches and other religious congregations that the faithful gather to engage in worship, prayer, and their faith’s rituals and celebrations. This is generally recognized. What is often missed, however, is that for many believers, religion is not merely something that takes place in a house of worship for one or two hours a week; it affects all aspects of their lives. This often includes banding together with others with shared beliefs to live out their faith together as they provide educational, health and social services.

The size of the religious nonprofit sector and the vital role it plays in American society mean that when the religious freedom rights of religiously based organizations are threatened, a truly serious religious freedom issue has arisen. Violations of the religious freedom rights of faith-based organizations constitute an interference with the religious freedom of tens of thousands of faith-based organizations. If we ignore such violations, the consequences for those organizations and the persons they serve would be severe. Faith-based organizations and their staffs and



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supporters would find their ability to follow their religious beliefs in the public realm constricted and limited. They would be slowly squeezed into a more secular mold and lose much of their religious distinctiveness. They would begin to look more and more alike. Many might decide to go out of business since the reason for their existence would be undercut. For the millions they now serve, diversity and choice would suffer. A way forward [must] take fully into account the true nature of religion as beliefs the faithful follow not only as members of religious congregations and as private individuals but also as citizens active in the public life of the nation. As we move in that direction, our vision of a nation marked by a renewal of religious freedom, pluralism and tolerance will be realized.

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