



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

Our Image-Bearing Responsibilities Require Protection of Diverse Civil Society Organizations

By Chelsea Langston Bombino

Chelsea Langston Bombino serves as the director of Sacred Sector, an initiative of the Center for Public Justice. In this role, Chelsea empowers faith-based organizations and future faith-based leaders to fully embody their sacred missions in every area of their organizational lives, including their public policy engagement, organizational practices and public positioning. Chelsea also serves as the director of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance (IRFA), a division of the Center for Public Justice. She currently serves as an adjunct professor at Pepperdine's Washington D.C. campus, where she teaches nonprofit management. Chelsea is also the early childhood ministry coordinator for her church, Potomac Valley Assembly. Chelsea serves on the boards of Young Leaders Institute and First Amendment Voice. Chelsea holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is a member of the State of Michigan Bar Association. She is married to Josh and lives outside of Baltimore, Maryland.

Abstract

The First Amendment to the US Constitution is both deeply personal and communal, meaning it applies to both individuals and institutions. Different elements of the First Amendment reflect something fundamental about what it means to be human. But American society is experiencing deep pluralism and people ultimately answer questions about what it means to be human through the lens of their sacred animating belief systems. These animating belief systems, or worldviews, are shaped by certain fundamental identities we have as individuals.

Many people have core animating beliefs that are explicitly shaped by spiritual values-what we hold most sacred. Everything, from what people eat, the products they purchase, the medications they take, and even civic actions – how people vote, what types of political activities they engage in, the types of policies they support or are engaged with, where they choose to donate their time or skills or money – can all be influenced by animating beliefs. The First Amendment protects a series of fundamental freedoms and human exercises: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and freedom to petition the government.

A public justice framework allows for both individuals and institutions to fulfill God's design for them and, in turn, allows us to learn something about what it means to be created in God's image. A public justice framework also aims to ensure human flourishing. To do this, the



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

government must ensure the ability of diverse individuals and communities--especially in our pluralistic society--to continue to flourish.

Have you ever considered how our Constitution's First Amendment is both deeply personal and communal? In other words, it applies to both individuals and institutions. Different elements of the First Amendment reflect something fundamental about what it means to be human. As humans, we ask ourselves the same fundamental questions: Why are we here and where are we going? Is there a divine creative force in our universe? And if so, what does that mean for us individually and collectively? What is best for our own well-being as individuals and as a society? How ought we structure relationships so as to maximize human flourishing? What is the source of our identity, and how does identity shape our beliefs and actions? What does it mean to give and receive love?

These questions are particularly poignant in this current moment, when American society is experiencing deep pluralism. We ultimately answer these questions about what it means to be human through the lens of our sacred animating belief systems. These animating belief systems, or worldviews, can be totalizing so that everything we do is shaped by certain fundamental identities we have whether these identities are explicitly religious, or not.

Many of us have core animating beliefs that are explicitly shaped by our spiritual values--by what we hold most sacred. It is true that not every belief system is explicitly religious in nature. One can be vegan, for example, and have their core animating beliefs shaped about animal ethics, environmentalism and/or human health. An ethical vegan may or may not hold explicitly religious beliefs that impact their veganism, yet this may be a deep and central part of their identity and shape their personal actions. This includes everything from what people eat, to the products they purchase, to the medications they take, can all be influenced by animating beliefs. Civic actions shape our identity, too: Even civic actions shape people: the way they vote, their political activities, their opinions on policies. Consider community actions, too, such as where they choose to donate their time or skills or money.

The First Amendment protects a series of fundamental freedoms and human exercises: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and freedom to petition the government. Each of these activities reflects a core element of our humanity. In the Christian tradition, we believe that humans are created in the image of God. That means that Christians believe that we see a bit of our creator in every living human person. We learn something of God by observing the fundamental activities of humans. People have human dignity because they were created in God's image. They bear His image in how they live every element of their lives. Therefore, we can look at human activities and the various roles humans play and learn something about the various roles our Creator plays. Being an image-bearer does not mean just fulfilling one monolithic role. In a Christian public justice perspective, we are called to have different roles and responsibilities in different spheres of life. It is not only



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

possible, but common and expected, that we bear the image of God in the different roles that we play. For example, one may be a student, a daughter, an employee, a church member and a volunteer at a human trafficking organization all at the same time. Each of these roles is played out in the context of a certain group or community. We are not employees, volunteers, or students in a vacuum, but those identities only fully come to life in the context of the specific communities of workplaces, nonprofit organizations, or campuses, respectively. Therefore, in a public justice framework, we can see that when humans fulfill their God-given roles in the different, God-given communities and institutions in their lives. Both individuals and institutions are fulfilling God's design for them and we also learn something about what it means to be created in God's image.

I am a Christian and I think these ideas make the most sense in the context of the Christian faith. But one need not be a Christian, nor an adherent of any explicitly religious tradition, to believe that humans have inherent dignity and that humans are called to different and multiple roles in their lives, depending on their current life stage. There are certain fundamental communities that we see again and again in societies and cultures across history and across geography, although the exact norms and structures of these communities can vary drastically. We see that humans need each other in different types of institutions to fulfill their inherent roles. These communities and institutions are fundamental to the experience of being human, and include, but are not limited to: families, communities of worship, government social service organizations, institutions of cultural formation, and businesses.

To truly protect human flourishing, we have to protect not just the individual rights elements of the First Amendment, but the capacity of these communities and their varied natures--especially in our pluralistic society—to continue to flourish. Freedom of religion in First Amendment represents a fundamental human activity that has both an individual or personal element and a communal or institutional element.

Freedom of religion is perhaps the most fundamental human freedom citizens have. It is often taken to mean freedom for individuals to determine what they hold sacred, whether it is adherence to an explicit religious faith or denial of religion altogether. For freedom of religion to flourish, individuals must be able to believe and practice their sacred animating beliefs. But beyond individual belief, humans must be able to exercise what they believe to be true in ways that are about how their sacred animating beliefs call them to live, serve and participate as citizens. So, for example, it is not enough that an atheist is simply allowed to deny the existence of God and his personal belief system. To fully live out their faith, one must be able to engage in speech activities, and potentially press, service, assembly, and government petition activities that also reflect his or her core beliefs. The protection of the individual right to be an atheist in the context of private activities is not enough to fully protect the spectrum of a person's humanity and how he or she expresses a core animating belief. The person must also be allowed to live out that belief in the context of the communities and institutions of which they are a part. There needs to be freedom for individuals who share this belief about atheism to come together and to also act together, whether that involves petitioning the government, engaging in certain



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

acts of service, or being educated in their communities. As a Christian, I need to be prepared to defend the rights of my atheist neighbor to fully express his or her humanity by allowing their beliefs to shape both personal and organizational actions. Therefore, freedom of religion is not fully embodied unless religious freedom is protected for both individuals and for institutions, and for acts that are both explicitly religious – like worship, fellowship and the reading of sacred text – and acts that are shaped by sacred animating beliefs like service to others, forming groups of affinity, educating children, and also in engaging government.

Religious freedom, put another way, is simply the ability to engage in acts of sacred significance. In today's diverse society, religious freedom is not fully encompassed without the recognition that groups and organizations must also be able to fully live out their sacred missions in public life.

We are living in a unique political and cultural moment—one where discussions are taking place about the need to strengthen our [communal civic life](#) and seek out innovative, [cross-institutional partnerships](#). Notably, this vision of increased quality of our shared civic and spiritual lives would be impossible without the civil society institutions that not only provide material and social resources, but also shape and nourish the soul. Faith-based organizations, from diverse faiths and all spheres of service, share the common goal of living out their sacred missions in their communities. We refer to these diverse faith-based organizations collectively as the *sacred sector*. The faith-based nonprofit sector – the sacred sector – is precisely what makes up America's spiritual infrastructure. America's sacred sector includes the hundreds of thousands of congregations and faith-based nonprofits across the country that provide not just material goods and services, but transcendent, spiritual nourishment to those in need.

The sacred sector in the United States is remarkably strong and diverse. Faith-based organizations, reflecting a wide spectrum of spiritual paradigms, offer our increasingly pluralistic society an array of options for healthcare, counseling, vocational training, early childhood education, advocacy engagement, and so much more. These social services and faith-centered opportunities for engagement often boast outcomes that rival those of their secular peer organizations, but with an added dimension: faith-based organizations operate out of their faith-shaped sacred calling to serve. Organizations with sacred missions should be committed to advancing the freedom for all organizations in a diverse society to seek meaning and live out their varied, and sometimes conflicting, truth claims and sacred purposes.

It is because public justice requires that we, as Christians, support the capacity of such a diversity of organizations to live out their spiritual precepts that we created an initiative dedicated to doing just that. Sacred Sector brings diverse religious organizations together, across difference, to learn from each other and strengthen their abilities to advance their sacred beliefs in everything they do. We called this initiative “Sacred Sector” because although religious organizations do not all share the same truth claims, they all believe the work they are doing has divine significance that advances the common good. At CPJ, I am the director of Sacred Sector. This initiative, is a community for faith-based organizations and emerging leaders of different



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

faiths and mission focus areas to equip, engage, and empower each other to fully live out their sacred missions in every area of organizational life. These organizations with sacred missions vary greatly in their faith identities and service areas. Yet these organizations all share the common goal of being able to fully incarnate their sacred missions in everything they do. In order for sacred sector organizations to thrive, they need to be able to distinctively impact their communities based on their spiritual and religious identities. With the support of Templeton Religion Trust, Sacred Sector empowers organizations with diverse sacred missions to come together to fully incarnate their faith-based identities in how they advance organizational practices, engage in public policy, and shape public perception. Sacred Sector provides a community for diverse faith-based organizations and emerging leaders to advance the common goal of fully incarnating and integrating their sacred missions in the public square – in organizational practices, in public policy engagement and in cultivating positive public positioning.

In our pluralistic society, the sacred sector—the diverse faith-based nonprofit sector—serves a crucial role in daily life, shaping citizens and bringing to bear public justice.

First, the series will explore how diverse organizations within the sacred sector uniquely embrace what they believe to be their sacred purposes and identities. Then, it will provide theological and philosophical principles undergirding why public justice requires supporting civil society organizations with very different purposes and precepts. Finally, the series will examine the types of organizations that make up the sacred sector in America, and make the case for why a diverse society needs such a diverse sacred sector to meet the varied and unique needs of individuals and their communities.

This series will include articles from Contributing Editor Chelsea Langston Bombino, director of Sacred Sector, an initiative of the Center for Public Justice (CPJ), and director of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance (IFRA), Stanley Carlson-Thies and Stephen Monsma, who co-authored the book entitled “*Free to Serve*,” Amy Coates-Madsen of the Standards for Excellence Institute, former CPJ President James Skillen in interview format discussing excerpts from his new book *God’s Sabbath with Creation*, a two-part article from John Larrivee, professor at Mount St Mary’s University discussing the historical backdrop and practical implications of faith-based universities in forming civil society, as well as an article by Tricia Bosma, a 2019 CPJ Sacred Sector Fellow.

To respond to the author of this article, please email PJR@cpjustice.org. The articles in Public Justice Review do not represent a consensus of positions on questions of public policy. We do



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

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.