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Are Principles Enough? Virtues in Public Policy

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In my office, just to the left of my desk, I have an overflowing bookshelf marked “Christian public policy.” The titles are a revealing contrast to the shelf just to the right that drops the “Christian” modifier. *Pluralism and Freedom. In Pursuit of Justice. The Challenge of Pluralism. Serving the Claims of Justice. Free to Serve. Godly Republic. Equal Treatment of Religion in a Pluralistic Society. The Religious Problem with Religious Freedom.* The message from these book covers is easy to judge: Policy analysis is not merely a technical matter of cost-benefit calculation or translation of group preferences into laws and regulations. It is a type of *moral* inquiry, a deduction from first principles rooted in biblical teachings and/or theological tradition. Those principles – justice and pluralism are among the obvious favorites – precede policy; they are the major premises in arguments that conclude with a policy vision.

I suspect many readers of *Public Justice Review* recognize the titles listed above. The first-principles approach to public policy is common fare among Christian theorists and analysts. It is also a compelling orientation to policy. It focuses our attention on the imperatives of faith and rejects pretensions to neutrality or “value-free” analysis. The approach reminds us that public policy is always an answer to a normative question, “What *ought* the state do, if anything, to meet human needs and foster public life?”

I wonder, however, if the focus on this category of arguments neglects a different dimension of public policy. The first-principles approach assesses policies by comparing biblical/theological expectations to the outcomes of those policies. A policy outcome is “good” when it meets those expectations. But what if we shift focus from outcomes to the practices and dispositions embedded in the policy process itself? What if we think in terms of not only the *values* that define policy outcomes but also the *virtues* that shape policy analysis and implementation?

A shift in emphasis from values to virtues speaks to this era of increasing diversity yet eroding civic dispositions. Christians today enter a public square bursting with countless forms of human association and visions of the good life. Our differences are often profound and sometimes deeply troubling. Some believers respond by clinging to an ideal of a “Christian nation,” a fervent desire to

transform culture into a flattened and homogenizing vision of human values and national destiny. While I find such visions generally self-defeating, at best, and idolatrous and violence-prone, at worst, I simply assume here that deep differences are a *fact* of modern experience that is unlikely to change. Policymaking across lines of difference is therefore a tough slog through ambiguity, competing values, negotiation, and compromise. To do that policy work well, then, we need civic virtues – dispositions nurtured by habits – that attend to the fact of pluralism. *How* we enter the policy process as public officials or ordinary citizens complements *why* we do so.

From Values to Virtues

A standard introductory text in American politics kicks off predictably with chapters on constitutional foundations, parties, interest groups, elections, and institutions for lawmaking. The reader waits until the conclusion for the policy chapters, a placement that signals a basic assumption. Public policy is an *outcome*. The texts' definitions of public policy reinforce the idea. [One prominent text](#) adapts Harold Lasswell's shorthand definition of politics: "Public policy is the product of politics, which resolves the questions of who get what, when, where, and how from government." [Another](#) suggests policy is a "choice that government makes in response ... to some problem." [Another](#) defines public policy as "a law, rule, or edict that expresses the government's goals and provides for rewards and punishments to promote their attainment." While the authors of these texts explore the myriad ideas and interests that shape public policy, they are careful to strike a neutral pose about the normative implications of government's "products," "choices," or "goals." They do not take an obvious stand about either the process or its results. Policy is simply a reflection of those interests that emerge through the crucible of democratic contestation. The key metric is how well the government identifies and responds to the people's interests, whatever they happen to be.

A Christian theology of public policy, of course, says something about the moral status of those interests. It is not enough to declare that the people have spoken; the people are often wrong. A Christian normative perspective starts outside of self-interests, seeking to match a biblical and theological vision to a clear-eyed understanding of both the role of the state and the urgency of our public problems.

My late friend and mentor Stephen Monsma exemplified this way of thinking in much of his work. In [Healing for a Broken World](#), for example, he takes us on a two-part tour of policy through the eyes of a Christian theorist and practitioner (Monsma served in his career as both a political scientist and public official). He starts in Part 1 by surveying key "principles" with biblical roots: a typology of creation, fall, and redemption; biblical justice in several of its key senses; solidarity, or a love of neighbors; and the differentiation of civil society and the state. Part 2 shifts to policy applications, ranging from social welfare to the war on terror. These applications follow not only sequentially but also the logic of Monsma's thinking. His goal is to identify "key biblical principles relevant to our lives as citizens [and] then appl[y] these principles to specific public-policy questions that are daily in the news." Policy prescriptions flow from an appropriate sense of underlying principles about economic, political, and social goods and structures. Those first principles distinguish a Christian perspective on public policy from conventional interest-based politics.

Monsma avoids deep dives into theology in *Healing for a Broken World*, which he wrote for a broad audience. But his debt to Reformed theology is unmistakable. The overall structure of his argument is rooted in a familiar grand narrative: the fundamentally good order to creation; the pervasive effects of

the fall throughout that creation; and the redemptive work of Christ, which motivates the grateful service of his disciples acting in all spheres of human experience, including the design and implementation of public policy. Monsma's perspective on justice and solidarity invoke the *Imago Dei* and *shalom*, drawing especially from [Nicholas Wolterstorff's philosophical treatment of the latter concept](#). Monsma grounds his perspective on societal differentiation in the rich tradition of pluralism, which takes its cues from Abraham Kuyper's idea of "sphere sovereignty" and its latter-day interpretations in the hands of [Richard Mouw](#), [Jonathan Chaplin](#), [James Skillen](#), and [Monsma himself](#), often with a nod to "subsidiarity," that kindred federalist idea in Catholic doctrine.

The message of all of this work is that we cannot understand public policy as a "product," "choice," or "decision" – those definitions in introductory texts – without first giving a deep account of the contexts that give policy outcomes meaning. What do human beings essentially need? Why does Scripture call us to do justice? What do we owe our neighbors? What does peace-seeking look like in a time shaped by the twin dangers of polarization and dislocation? And what are the purposes of the state vis-à-vis the church and other institutions that share a role in forming our lives in common? The theological answers to these questions have been varied and rich, and in some cases influential, notably through initiatives that have introduced a normative perspective on pluralism into education and welfare policy.

But consider again Monsma's presentation in *Healing for a Broken World*. In the midst of his first-principle arguments, another set of claims operates through hints and asides. He references humility repeatedly, for example. He fills the text with variations on that term that seem to function side-by-side with the argument from principle. An example: "the truly important thing is that we approach issues *humbly* and with our minds shaped by biblically-based principles, not by the various political idols of our day" (my emphasis). The puzzle is that, while he is convinced that humility is indispensable to good policy work - and anyone who knew Monsma would say he practiced what he subtly preached - he does not develop a theological or biblical account of that virtue. My reading is that much Christian policy analysis has a similar expectation about key civic virtues that operates largely as a subtext.

That is not to suggest that Christians have neglected civic virtue in general. Far from it. We can draw from two millennia of thinking about the habits of mind and heart that matter to our lives in common. Some recent examples in a Reformed vein: [Mouw](#) has written at length about Christian civility. [Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson](#) have explored perseverance as a virtue that goes hand-in-glove with a calling to do justice. Steve Monsma himself was part of [a team that explored](#) the intersection of faith, participation, and civic dispositions such as trust, tolerance, law-abidingness, and efficacy. [James K.A. Smith](#) has developed a full public theology that explores how our habits form us for public life. And [Harold Heie](#) has convened conversations about hot-button policy issues that require participants to commit to mutual respect. ([David Ryden's compilation](#) has a similar goal.)

Most of these discussions do not address virtues within public policy directly but rather focus on pastoral or ecclesiastical implications or on fostering healthy conversations among Christians about first principles. Nevertheless, they intimate at the need for a more comprehensive exploration of how our dispositions and habits matter to how we analyze and implement public policy. Monsma's emphasis on the virtue of humility suggests some possible directions.

Humility in Public Policy

In his teaching about the imitation of Christ in his letter to the Philippians, Paul treats humility not as mere self-abnegation, but as a relational disposition, a practice focused on others and patterned after Christ's incarnation. "In humility value others above yourselves," he says, "not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus..." (Philippians 2:3-5). Of course, to say that humility entails interpersonal engagement does not necessarily recommend particular *sites* for that engagement, including the policy process. But it does caution against the [moral paralysis](#) or [hunkering down in self-isolation](#) to which many Christians – along with other Americans – are increasingly succumbing. As the late scholar-practitioner [Paul Henry](#) suggests, "You do not rescue yourself from moral complicity by withdrawal." This is why, I would argue, the prophet Micah, who famously calls us to a *humble* walk with God (after reminding us, in the less famous earlier verses, that we cannot earn a way out of our guilt), in the same breath admonishes us to "act justly and love mercy" (Micah 6:8). Here we can tentatively connect the dots between engaged humility, justice, and public policy. Government, as a gift from God that humans use to advance public justice, is a key arena for answering Micah's call.

But that commitment to engage the policy process can swing Christians to triumphalism, the opposite extreme from disengagement. Humility also counters triumphalism, which in the policy realm usually takes the form of insisting that a biblical or theological framework yields one right policy solution to a public problem. By presuming that God must be on their side, triumphalists almost always underestimate social complexity and overestimate the human capacity to address it. They neglect a different sense of humility: the recognition of human fallibility and fallenness. Henry, who drew from his experience as a political scientist, state agency administrator, and member of the U.S. House of Representatives, was particularly astute in describing this challenge. First, [Henry notes](#) simply that God's ways are often inscrutable. Our inability "to know or apply [God's standards] with perfection" is perhaps felt most strongly in modern policy choices, partly because the Bible itself rarely provides explicit guidelines. Second, even if we had ironclad insight into those standards, citizens and political leaders must apply them to public problems that are so complex they can mystify even our best minds. Third, even if we have a clear definition of the problems we face, we still have to sort through the real threat of unintended consequences. Taken together, Henry says, these dimensions of moral and informational ambiguity "call for humility and restraint."

Yet policies *are* enacted, which raises questions about those public servants called to implement those enactments in a morally ambiguous space. Henry's posture of humility provides a starting point here too. It is easy to talk about "faceless bureaucrats," the stereotype of the unaccountable public official whose dictates undermine the plans of everyone from business owners to drivers on a busy street. But that language is normative; it builds habits of distrust. It is a kind of hubris when we *presume* incompetence or malevolence, usually based on our own low information, rather than trust in a bureaucrat's work. To be sure, what social scientists call the "[principal-agent problem](#)," the risk of a conflict between the will of decision-makers and the interests of decision-implementers, is quite real. And there is a place for skepticism about dysfunctional systems or critique of the administrative state. But we often proceed as if [frontline bureaucrats](#) are to blame for policy failures that are just as likely caused by ambiguous direction or unmanageable workloads.

A related point deals with technical expertise. Christian perspectives on public policy rarely have much to say about the technical details of policymaking and public administration – and rightly so. Christians might have biblically based arguments, for example, about whether income taxes ought to be progressive or flat in their structure. But the underlying principles that would inform that view do not clearly settle the technical question of what the specific tax rates ought to be in order to meet revenue targets. That suggests the need for Christians to show a measure of deference to those professionals we entrust to make such decisions. Yet increasingly some evangelicals are joining the populist chorus in questioning the work of policy experts, from climatologists to economic forecasters, as suspect or even “false” because their results do not comport with a hoped-for outcome. Would not a posture of humility call for a different response to technical expertise?

I intend this sketch of humility in the policy process to point in a direction, not to go far down the road. It is also a mere case study: there many other virtues and dispositions that could have the same treatment. But the point is the same in each instance. To argue from a Christian perspective for a position on taxation or social welfare or military intervention is only part of the act of policymaking. Our accounts of public policy need both first principles and practices, values and virtues.

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.