

Reforming Public Theology: Neocalvinism and Pluralism

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Introduction

You don't need a North American to come and tell you about the realities of pluralism. Residents of the Netherlands, and Europe more generally, are more intimately acquainted with the challenges (and opportunities?) of pluralism than those of us who live in the still overwhelmingly homogenous United States (even if that reality is changing). Indeed, the sprawling expanse of the U.S. leaves room for the influx of difference to still be largely distant from many of its citizens, whereas the intimacy, even claustrophobia, of Europe and the Netherlands means that difference is next door to everyone, in everyone's classroom, a ubiquitous reality. Pluralism and difference are the water you swim in. (There might be a joke in there about dikes but I won't try it out.)

And as Neocalvinists, you would think we have all the resources we need to grapple constructively with this explosion of difference and plurality. Kuyperians were pluralists before pluralism was cool. In the Netherlands the tradition has long argued for a pluralist society, with a multiplication of institutions and spheres to ward off the hegemony of the sprawling state. In North America, Neocalvinism has been inherited precisely as a way to ward off Christian hegemony within the state, a way to exor-

cise theocratic demons from the Religious Right, an antidote to “Christendom.”¹ Thus Neocalvinist interventions in U.S. politics often counsel the “embrace” of pluralism.² Neocalvinism, you might say, was ahead of its time and should have new resonance and uptake in the fraught pluralization of the democratic West. Neocalvinists might be tempted to think: “Now is our time!”

Hold that thought.

While I don’t want to deflate enthusiasm for Neocalvinism, I do intend to deflate some of our enthusiasm for how we talk about pluralism. My argument in this paper is a bit iconoclastic. (I hope you’ll receive it as an “internal” critique of Neocalvinism though, at times, I imagine, it might feel more like friendly fire). My concern is a blind spot in Neocalvinist accounts of pluralism and political life that stems from a wider, more systemic tendency within Neocalvinism to devalue and displace the significance of the institutional church, site of Word and sacrament. If it seems odd to invoke the institutional church to talk about pluralism and political life, I suggest this is more a tic of Neocalvinism than a problem with my proposal per se.

I want to argue that Neocalvinist accounts of pluralism are missing precisely what we need to grapple with pluralism today: an appreciation for the *virtues* and dispositions required to live in pluralistic societies which are inculcated through *formation* in liturgical communities. While we have articulated theories of pluralism, what society also needs are incubators of virtues like patience, longsuffering, and above all, love.³ We have offered Christian philosophies of pluralism when what a pluralistic society *needs* is the Spirit-ed virtue incubator that is the church (along with families and schools and guilds that extend this work).

But I will be an equal opportunity offender insofar as I will also argue that the liberal state also lacks the formative resources it needs to engender citizens who have the know-how to live well in pluralistic societies, which is precisely why liberal democracies should not only “make room” for traditional religious communities but, in fact, *depend* on them. As we reach the other side of the great liberal democratic experiment in Europe, perhaps we’ll find that what liberalism needs is not just Christian *theories* but the formative communities of the church.

The Challenge of Pluralism

The “challenge” of pluralism is the challenge of forging a life in common in neighborhoods, communities, territories, and states that are populated by citizens with divergent worldviews, different ultimate beliefs about the Good, and different practices and rituals that they understand to constitute a life well lived. In short, the challenge

¹ A term rather irresponsibly bandied about along with the epithet “Constantinian.”

² I wonder if our European sisters and brothers think we see such embrace of pluralism as a luxury in a society that is still, in many ways, very homogenous.

³ Cf. Gregory’s Augustine book.

of pluralism is how to forge common life in the midst of I'm going to call "confessional" diversity or what John Inazu simply calls "deep differences."⁴ This "common life" need not be a *uniform* life, and certainly doesn't require any kind of *national* uniformity. By "forging a life in common" I simply mean the human endeavor of seeking to live in some kind of harmony and peace with our neighbors—the ability to collaborate on necessities of human life in the shared territory of creation. *Place* is a condition of this, and such "life together" will always be located and bounded. As Oliver O'Donovan rightly points out, the concreteness of particular societies is linked to place: "Place is the social communication of space. A saying of Gregory the Great preserved in Bede declares, 'Things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things.' Places are the precondition for social communication in material and intellectual goods."⁵ This shared territory could include "neighborhood watch" responsibilities on our street, a public library in our city, health care policy in our state or province, economic legislation at federal levels, and a million things in between. In this sense the challenge of pluralism is not merely governmental or political; it is part of the human endeavor of solidarity for all sorts of needs and goods. In Inazu's terms, we are trying to figuring out "how to live together in society," drawing upon "certain shared resources and common aspirations" in order to attain "some modest unity in our diversity."⁶ Contrary to Rousseau, we might put this even more starkly: the challenge of pluralism is how to "live at peace with those we regard as damned."

Many responses to such deep diversity and contestation about the good life seek to overcome it by imposing a hegemonic consensus. There are religious versions of this (either historically or globally, including Christian and Muslim versions) but also secular versions of such intolerant consensus that seem to characterize the newly emergent progressive intolerance that religious communities sense today. These are "responses" to pluralism only insofar as they see a *de facto* reality and seek to normatively quash it.

However, if pluralism can be threatened by hegemonic consensus that imposes a common life, it can also be threatened by an apathy, cynicism, and atomistic egoism that simply abandons any interest in solidarity. Oliver O'Donovan describes the broad communal impulse of society in terms of "communication": "To 'communicate,' " he says, "is to hold something in common, to make it a common possession, to treat it as 'ours,' rather than 'yours' or 'mine.'"⁷ While we have long counted on a social impulse that is a creational structure, we might have overestimated its preservation.⁸ All sorts of cultural forces seem to have unleashed an individualism and egoism that has eroded habits of solidarity to the point that the very "communication"

⁴ John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁵ *The Ways of Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 255.

⁶ Inazu, 7.

⁷ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 242.

⁸ [There's a Schilderian point to me made here, likely.]

that undergirds society is in danger of being shredded by tribalisms of class, race, and most significantly, self-interest, reducing our concern to the tribe of one—me. In this sense, the diversity of a pluralistic society would be a complex mix of commonality and difference: in a society where atomistic individualism is a widely *shared* “social imaginary,” the pervasiveness of this imaginary also divides us into islands of self-interest. Society becomes an archipelago of egoists.⁹

So we have a two-fold challenge to the social task of forging life in common: the deep, confessional diversity that shapes how we think about a life well-lived and the norms for a good society; and the corrosive, anti-social forces—often fostered by the pseudo-community of the market and the state—that incline us toward Rand-ian self-interest and self-preservation. Atlas shrugs while the ties that bind fray to breaking.

Accounting for Pluralism

In the face of these forces, the Reformed tradition of social thought nourished by Kuyper, Bavinck, and Dooyeweerd has persistently articulated a robust vision for societal health. In this respect, what has been called (Kuyperian) “principled pluralism”¹⁰ [PP] has often been fighting on two fronts. On the one hand, it has functioned as an internal critique of Christian hegemony over public life and the political sphere in particular. Invoking sphere sovereignty (especially when coupled with an appropriate eschatology), PP criticizes Christian attempts to simply silence or deny directional diversity. This is Neocalvinism’s anti-Constantinian, anti-establishment, anti-Christendom¹¹ move.¹² (It is perhaps ironic that in the United States, where there has never been an established church¹³, Protestant evangelicals who have appropriated Kuyper have often been most enthusiastic about his doctrine of sphere sovereignty as a theological rationale to underwrite the separation of church and state.¹⁴)

⁹ In a recent essay, Jonathan Rauch has described this as “chaos syndrome”: “Chaos syndrome is a chronic decline in the political system’s capacity for self-organization. It begins with the weakening of the institutions and brokers—political parties, career politicians, and congressional leaders and committees—that have historically held politicians accountable to one another and prevented everyone in the system from pursuing naked self-interest all the time. As these intermediaries’ influence fades, politicians, activists, and voters all become more individualistic and unaccountable. The system atomizes. Chaos becomes the new normal—both in campaigns and in the government itself.” Rauch, “How American Politics Went Insane,” *The Atlantic* (July/August 2016).

¹⁰ For a recent, succinct statement of this, see Stephen V. Monsma and Stanley W. Carlson-Thies, *Free to Serve: Protecting the Religious Freedom of Faith-Based Organizations* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 96-101. See also James K.A. Smith, “The Reformed (Transformationist) View,” in *The Church and Politics: Five Views*, ed. Amy E. Black (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 139-162.

¹¹ I’m using this term very loosely.

¹² Cp. also Kristen Deede Johnson’s persist cautions about Christianity “taking over” in *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 184, 198, 215, 224, 235, 253-254. I will return to Johnson’s cautions below.

¹³ Indeed, Oliver O’Donovan dates “the end of Christendom” in 1776!

¹⁴ See Bolt, REF

On the other hand, PP also pushes back on the myth of any feigned secular “neutrality” in the political sphere or any hegemonic liberal denial of directional diversity (and finds allies in such a critique from non-religious voices like Jeffrey Stout and William Connolly¹⁵). It argues that democratic, pluralistic societies need to make room for religious voices and religious communities in the wider web of civil society as a matter of societal health.

This is part of a broader Neocalvinist articulation of a pluralistic social philosophy. Philosophers and theorists such as Herman Dooyeweerd, Richard Mouw, Sander Griffioen, James Skillen, and Jonathan Chaplin have all articulated, under slightly different nomenclatures, a taxonomy of difference and plurality that we encounter in modern, globalized societies. Let me take Jonathan Chaplin’s “map” of societal plurality as representative, particularly since he sees himself refining and updating the prior work of the others I’ve just mentioned. Chaplin notes three kinds of societal plurality:

1. *Structural* plurality (what Mouw & Griffioen call “associational” plurality) “refers to the plurality of qualitatively distinct, functionally specific associations, institutions or communities populating a modern society.”¹⁶ In other words, in a healthy society, we will find an array of institutions, associations, and communities like schools, art guilds, labor unions, families, churches, mosques, bowling leagues, etc., etc. that comprise what political scientists describe as “civil society.”¹⁷ This plurality of social structures is rooted in a *creational* calling. Families and schools and businesses aren’t just “good ideas” that we came up with; they are forged in response to something that creation itself calls for.¹⁸ Thus Chaplin emphasizes that “structural plurality has ontological primacy, since it arises from the most fundamental and enduring imperatives of our created social nature, giving rise to what might be called the social analogue of ‘creational kinds.’”¹⁹
2. *Cultural* plurality (what Mouw & Griffioen call “contextual” plurality) refers to the diverse expressions realized in human culture across history and around the globe. The realization of ontological structures like families and businesses take on different vibes, flavors, and “looks” depending on cultural context. These different expressions can be “equally expressive of the potential for human diversity rooted in divinely created potentials.” The divine calls folded into creation can be unfurled with a different flair in Indonesia or Indiana.

¹⁵ See Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* and Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*.

¹⁶ Jonathan Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity: From ‘Liberal Pluralism’ to ‘Christian Pluralism,’” *Christian Scholar’s Review* XXXV.2 (2006): 143-175 at p. 146.

¹⁷ In *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society*, Chaplin thus locates this account in a family of political theories devoted to “normative institutional pluralism.” More on this below.

¹⁸ REF Olthuis on gift/call.

¹⁹ Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality,” 146-147.

“The plurality of particular cultures,” Chaplin notes, “each opening up a different facet of God’s gifts of social intercourse, communal organization, linguistic and artistic expression, intellectual and technical exploration and so on, is not something that should be resisted by Christians but rather joyfully celebrated.”²⁰

3. *Directional* plurality names “the plurality of religions, worldviews or other fundamental spiritual orientations” that animate people and communities in diverse societies.²¹ This is “directional” plurality insofar as these spiritual orientations and fundamental conceptions of the Good direct and govern what we pursue, what we value, and how we act in society—which is precisely what it is this plurality. We might call this “confessional” plurality. This, as you should expect, is the most challenging.

Mouw & Griffioen rightly note that each of these can have descriptive and normative expressions. We might think of this as the difference between descriptive recognition of *de facto* pluralities and a normative call to preserve or foster such pluralities as *pluralisms*.²² This adds some nuance and complexity to exhortations for us to “embrace pluralism” or “celebrate diversity.” Based on this taxonomy, what we get is “two cheers” for pluralism: a normative “celebration” of pluralism with respect to structural and cultural plurality while directional/confessional plurality is descriptively recognized, and constructively addressed, but not normatively celebrated. “While structural and cultural plurality are divine gifts to be celebrated, this clearly cannot be said of directional plurality. Deep differences of spiritual direction cannot, from a Christian viewpoint, be regarded as anything other than the bitter fruits of the Fall.”²³

Nonetheless, this does not simply entail Christian opposition to directional plurality but rather a constructive program for its negotiation. It is precisely at this juncture that Chaplin and other Neocalvinists locate the unique responsibility of *one* of those diverse societal structures—the state. So I want to briefly consider Chaplin’s notion of a “Christian diversity state” as a constructive Christian response to the reality of directional plurality, one that refuses to celebrate directional plurality, but also stops short of trying to eliminate it—indeed, a proposal for the state to *make room* for directional diversity as a matter of public justice.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 147. There are serious questions about race as an instance of plurality. While on the one hand it should be seen through the lens of cultural plurality, and hence celebrated as a prismatic realization of good creational differences, on the other hand race is clearly overlaid with all sorts of matters of public in/justice, and in those societies where identity politics has taken hold, race also functions as its own worldview or “direction”—perhaps especially for those who imagine themselves “color blind” (i.e., dominant whites). See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). We will return to this in chapter [X] below.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See James H. Olthuis, “Exclusions and Inclusions: Dilemmas of Differences,” in *Towards an Ethics of Community: Negotiations of Difference in a Pluralist Society*, ed. James Olthuis (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 1-10.

²³ Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality,” 148.

Chaplin’s “Christian Diversity State”

Since Chaplin’s proposal for a “Christian diversity state” is quite obviously rooted in a broadly Dooyeweerdian social theory, we might look at his explication of Dooyeweerd as relevant context and background. In his remarkable and singular book, *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society*, Chaplin locates “Christian pluralism” in a family of theories that advocate “normative pluralism.” Such theories all share two claims:

1. “that a healthy, just, free, and stable civil society requires a multiplicity of relatively independent and qualitatively distinct associations, communities, institutions and other social bodies, through which individual human capacities or interests can be realized and apart from which the fabric of social unity will wear thin;”²⁴ and
2. “that the principle function of the state is to actively facilitate this realization by protecting or promoting the responsible independence of, and interaction between, these bodies.”²⁵

This accords a delimited (though not necessarily minimal²⁶) role for the state as the social structure that is responsible for fostering a healthy society that makes room for all of the other, non-state social structures to flourish and relate well to one another (classic sphere sovereignty, in some ways). Chaplin calls this “public justice”:

Public justice, then, requires the state to acknowledge the legitimate rights, duties, and competences of persons and structures and to create the necessary legal protection for them to realize them. [...] The state is to create a network of just interrelationships between the various social structures and persons within the territory.²⁷

²⁴ Jonathan Chaplin, *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 16. Chaplin adds an important contrastive proviso: “unlike Aristotelians, republicans, nationalist, or collectivists of all stripes, [normative pluralists] deny that membership in the *polis* is either morally prior to or more ennobling than membership in other communities or associations.” However, these seems to accept the long Aristotelian assumption that there is always and only *one* polis governing any particular territory, whereas the MacIntyrean point seems to be that there are or can be competing *polei* within a defined territory. [Do we really want to make the state synonymous with the polis?] [cf. “territorial monopoly of coercion within territorial boundaries” (p. 168)]

²⁵ *Ibid.* Here, too, an illuminating, contrastive qualifier: “Unlike bureaucratic centralizers, they deny that the state has the capacity of the competence to manage and direct the whole of society, and unlike minimal statist, they deny that just and cohesive relations between social institutions arise spontaneously apart from active political coordination.” Cp. “political enkapsis”: denies “that the state has any original competence in nonpolitical structures while also affirming the competence of the state to regulate externally any nonpolitical structure insofar as its activities have public consequences” (*ibid.*, 222).

²⁶ See *Dooyeweerd*, 228-229, on “the public interest.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 225. Note: “The state is not responsible for the *internal* legal domain of a social structure; it

So what does this entail with respect to the state's role in the face of directional plurality? As the arbiter and meta-relater of society's diverse institutions and communities, is the state merely a neutral referee, confessionally agnostic? In the name of Christian pluralism, does sphere sovereignty end up being another way to mere liberalism?

Chaplin insists not. In a constructive proposal of his own, Chaplin explicitly rejects the notion that the state could be "neutral," rejecting the "neutralist paradigm" that has been criticized by others, and not only religious theorists.²⁸ Riffing on William Galston's notion of the confessedly *liberal* "diversity state," Chaplin offers a distinctly Christian account of how and why the state ought to make room for directional diversity. A Christian diversity state would encourage a robust civil society (associational pluralism), would celebrate cultural diversity (contextual pluralism), and would recognize and take seriously the reality of directional plurality. As Chaplin summarizes:

[A] Christian diversity state would be attentive to all three types, recognizing structural and cultural plurality as rooted in and deriving their own normative design from the inclinations of created order, and acknowledging directional plurality (itself a result of the fall) as deserving of just adjudication. But, [...] and crucially, it would embrace all these things on the basis of a clear understanding of the normative content and limits of the purpose of the state *itself*. [...] A Christian diversity state, then, would not merely seek to promote a neutral state which Christians happened to be able to endorse... It would offer much more than a pluralist or communitarian gloss on individualistic liberal neutrality, but would aspire towards an authentically Christian model of a directionally tolerant constitutional democracy.²⁹

This model is tied to an understanding of the purpose and telos of the state as arbiter of public justice. Thus, contrary to "establishment" models, the Christian diversity state doesn't endorse a direction *qua state*; but contrary to liberal models, neither does it pretend to be neutral nor does it make directional pluralism a *goal*. The Christian diversity state is animated by *Christian* convictions for being impartial.³⁰ So it is not directionally neutral, but because it would be animated by a Christian direction, it would have substantive reasons to "respect diversity."

This is an especially unique and capacious *Christian* responsibility for the state in comparison to burgeoning political movements and parties in Europe and the United States that, while claiming a "Christian" mantle, evaluate almost all diversity—especially cultural and directional—as differences to be quashed, eliminated,

may not impose compulsory dieting on persons or families, or set prices for private industries." But doesn't it? What if the state administers healthcare? (Nudges?)

²⁸ Kymlicka, Stout, Connolly, Galston.

²⁹ Chaplin, "Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity," 168-169.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

barred and prevented. I want to underscore my deep sympathy with Chaplin's vision for a state that recognizes "what time it is"—that is, a state that recognizes that we remain in the *saeculum*, that the eschaton has not arrived, that we cannot institute kingdom come, and that the elimination of directional diversity is not the state's job.³¹ Nonetheless, precisely because I am sympathetic with Chaplin's Neocalvinist articulation, I want to push back on aspects of his proposal.

Naturalizing the State: Sphere Sovereignty as Macro-liberalism?

What has long bothered me about the way sphere sovereignty functions in public theology is the way it seems to yield what, at the end of the day, feels like a kind of macro-liberalism—what, following Michael Sandel, we might call "a procedural republic."³² Principled pluralism rightly calls into question the myth of neutrality that so often underwrites secularism, and it decries the laissez-faire individualism that undergirds liberalism. Thus Neocalvinist public philosophy has long argued for a directional diversity in the state that makes room for Christians to not only sustain churches and other Christian institutions in civil society but also speak in the arenas of politics with substantively Christian voices.³³ But it is a *principled* pluralism because it at the same time argues that *all* confessions and directional orientations should have the same opportunity and access. And so it ends up making a *meta* argument for what I'm calling a kind of *macro* liberalism wherein a "just" society in one in which different confessional communities are free to pursue *their* visions of the good.

In Chaplin's proposal, this becomes a principled argument for an impartial state since the state is that one institution charged with being the arbiter between different confessional communities. He does so on the basis of a distinction that is, I think, problematic. Criticizing those who favor "establishment" models of the Christian state (such as Andrew Walker and Oliver O'Donovan), Chaplin says they "fail to make a vital distinction between *directional* truth—the ultimate truth about our existence—and *political* truth—the truth about the shape of a normative political order."³⁴ It is this distinction that is then the basis for his vision of an impartial state that can function as a "just" arbiter: "Insisting on the distinction between religious and political truth-claims is not to embrace a *neutral* state, only a *limited* state. It is to identify correctly the boundaries of the different structural spheres—ecclesial and political—in which distinct...kinds of truth claims are appropriatively authoritative."³⁵

³¹ As O'Donovan points out, "The most truly Christian state understands itself most thoroughly as 'secular'" (DN 219).

³² Douglas Farrow cites the term in *Desiring a Better Country: Forays in Political Theology* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 53.

³³ Cp. Wolterstorff/Audi volume.

³⁴ Chaplin, "Rejecting Neutrality," 166.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

This is an odd sort of distinction for a Neocalvinist to make. For what “truth” isn’t suffused with directional commitments? What “truth” isn’t normed by God’s ordinances for creation? What “truth” isn’t taken up in the cosmic scope of Christ’s redemption? Is not political life as sphere of creaturely reality over which Christ claims lordship? And therefore isn’t the state also answerable to that lordship in its Gospel-ed specificity?

And yet Chaplin’s distinction between “directional” and “political” truth only functions in his argument if “political” truth is somehow circumscribed to something less than directional insight. Functionally, it seems to me, “political” truth seems to be sequestered to the penultimate and operates in ways akin to “natural law.” At the very least, it seems to suggest that the *directional* resources of revelation are inappropriate in the “political” sphere. Hence the macro-liberalization of the state leads (quite naturally?) to a *naturalization* of the state and politics, effectively accepting the epistemic standards of secularization.³⁶ Too much neocalvinist political thought generates sophisticated theological acrobatics for treating the political as a “natural” sphere and seems to be embarrassed by any suggestion otherwise. It’s as if principled pluralism becomes a theological rationale for assuring liberal democrats that we’re willing to play along with their functionally naturalized, secularized political game. Give us a seat at the table. We won’t be a bother. We won’t be so gauche as to invoke Jesus. We understand the rules: we promise to only invoke “political” truth.

For those Neocalvinists who have adopted this minimalist—one might even say timid—posture, it can be jarring to read our forebears. Kuyper and Bavinck’s remarks in parliament or the States General will be disconcerting, even embarrassing.³⁷ Most jarring, I think, will be the analyses and diagnostic of Groen Van Prinsterer. I daresay that Kuyperian advocates of principled pluralism today would cringe at Groen’s forthright critique of *unbelief*. We have accepted naturalism and disenchantment as the price of admission. We have gone from being the people of the Anti-Revolutionary Party to accepting the Revolution’s terms of engagement. We have sequestered “political” truth from transcendent claims. “Common grace” becomes cover for a practical atheism.³⁸

So in the name of “public justice” we scale back what counts as “political truth” in ways that effectively rule out the specificity what we know by special revelation. But more specifically, because of an outsized desire to *not* “take over,” we shrink to a kind of minimalism in our public engagement that either just asks for “a seat at the table” or that society give us room in the corner of society to follow what we understand to be lives well lived.

But if we are convinced (convicted) that in Christ and his Word we know something about *how to be human*, then shouldn’t we seek to bend social practices and policy

³⁶ I have argued elsewhere that natural law approaches end up doing the same. REF

³⁷ REF Bavinck’s addresses in *Science, Religion, and Society*.

³⁸ [inverting this, FTR, is not equivalent to quashing pluralism—stay tuned]

in that direction *for the good of our neighbors*? We cannot and ought not to instantiate the kingdom, of course. But neither is society impervious to the Gospel.³⁹ If, as Chaplin points out, the state will “necessarily reflect the preponderant influence of one or more particular directionally-oriented political perspectives,”⁴⁰ why shouldn’t we hope that might be a *Christian* direction? Or, if per Johnson, “political theory is nothing if not an exercise of imagination,” and if “[i]ndeed the success or popularity of a political theory could be said to depend upon the extent to which it offers a picture of political society and life that is more attractive and persuasive than that of the *status quo*,”⁴¹ then why not imagine the possibility that a *Christian* political theory or social imaginary could be persuasive for a society? It was once. There’s nothing *in principle* to rule it out again. Why should we settle for a minimum we think is “winnable?”⁴² The flourishing of our neighbors and the vulnerable among us might depend on it. Such a robust vision and hope would not be a defense measure of securing our “rights” but rather a missional concern to see our neighbors live with the grain of the universe, for their own good—including those with different directional orientations and confessions.⁴³

We do well to reacquaint ourselves with the unapologetic forthrightness of Groen van Prinsterer in tracing the political ills of society to unbelief (even if there are also other factors). “*Atheism* in religion and *radicalism* in politics,” he points out, “are not only *not* the exaggeration, misuse or distortion, but in fact the consistent and faithful application of a principle which sets aside the God of Revelation in favour of the supremacy of reason.”⁴⁴ At the heart of this Revolutionary standpoint (direction) is the sovereignty of man, independent of the sovereignty of God⁴⁵—so how likely is such a society going to listen to prattle about “sphere sovereignty” if the society’s foundation is a disenchanting immanence in which man is the last sovereign standing? Indeed, “the Revolution doctrine is the Religion, as it were, of unbelief.”⁴⁶

³⁹ See Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity*, pp. 137-138.

⁴⁰ Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality,” 159.

⁴¹ Johnson, *ibid.*, 22.

⁴² “What have we done,” Groen van Prinsterer asks, “and what are we doing? Nothing. We eliminate ourselves. We render ourselves insignificant. Because we do not aspire to anything higher, we are a coterie in the church and conformists or outcasts in the state.” G. Groen van Prinsterer, “Unbelief and Revolution: A Series of Historical Lectures” [1847], in Harry Van Dyke, *Groen Van Prinsterer’s Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution* (Jordan Station, ON: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1989), 424n17 (citing Van Dyke’s marginal page numbers to the Dutch edition).

⁴³ See Joan Lockwood O’Donovan’s argument re: established church as best guarantor of religious minority rights (REF & Comment interview).

⁴⁴ Groen van Prinsterer, 183.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 192. Groen also anticipates why unbelief will become so intolerant of belief: “To deny the truth is also of necessity to despise and to hate actively—not just philosophically, but militantly—everything that is adjudged false and therefore evil. And the Gospel and Christian belief are certainly false and evil from the viewpoint of the unbelieving philosophy. Once denied, revealed truths are nefarious superstitions, the worst of the impediments blocking the road to enlightenment and self-perfection. Wherever the lie triumphs, it must hate every element of the truth that still

Perhaps we've let sphere sovereignty be co-opted by the Revolution. Sphere sovereignty with respect to the state does not "naturalize" it; nor does recognizing the "limits" of the state reduce it to immanence. Distinguishing the state from the church doesn't nullify the state's creaturely calling, nor does it insulate it from the claims and insights of *special* revelation. What if unbelief is, in fact, the most significant barrier to justice in politics? What if the acceptance of a disenchanted world has encased us in a claustrophobic "immanent frame" that also cuts us off from the sources we need to live well together in the midst of directional plurality? Then limiting ourselves to a "political" truth that is sequestered from revelational insight is not the path to justice but instead a reinforcement of the root problem. What if only theism can actually underwrite toleration?⁴⁷

Practicing Pluralism: Reforming Reformed Social Thought

Thus far I've argued that, while Neocalvinist public philosophy has articulated a helpful, nuanced account of social plurality, and rightly desires a society and state that can manage directional diversity without merely stamping out difference, there are reasons to worry that the Neocalvinist solutions have, of late, ceded too much to secularism and liberalism. To this let me add a second substantive concern.

Neocalvinism's advocacy for pluralism has largely been architectonic; that is, PP mostly offers an alternative *account*, a different *theory* or "perspective"⁴⁸ that reframes public life so that Christians will hopefully see why they should abandon culture warrior "take over" bids and so that liberals will see why they ought to refuse the same. While this sort of theoretical, architectonic concern about principles and procedures is surely right, it is inadequate insofar as the challenge of "forging common life in the midst of directional diversity" requires not only theoretical scaffolding but also *dispositions* and *habits* (yea, *virtues*) of citizens who live and act in common within society. A healthy, pluralistic society is not just a matter of policing sphere boundaries and getting law & policy right, (though it certainly includes that); it also requires attention to the *formation* of agents and actors within those parameters who inhabit both the specific sphere of the state as well as the other social structures that comprise civil society.⁴⁹ Indeed, the formation of dispositions—as "know-how"—may be primary since it is not likely that policy will be endorsed without citizens having af-

remains. Even deism, however diluted, is an offense to an atheist. In his estimation, whoever believes in a God, of whatever description, is a bigoted proponent of childish and harmful ideas." (198-199). Echoing Burke,

⁴⁷ There might be an argument to spin here that is akin to Nicholas Wolterstorff's genealogy of rights in *Justice* wherein cogent rights-talk needs to avail itself of the moral sources of a distinct theism that affirms every person is loved by God.

⁴⁸ This reflects what Charles Taylor (following Bourdieu) would describe as an "intellectualist" account of how citizens act and interact.

⁴⁹ Directional plurality is not *only* a challenge in the political sphere; it can also manifest itself in the spheres of education, commerce, even the family.

fective sympathy with the goods articulated in such policies.⁵⁰ In short, any account of “good” citizenship in a pluralistic society needs to be rooted in a sufficiently holistic anthropology that is attentive not only to the systems of a just-yet-diverse society but also to the formation of citizens with the requisite habits and virtues.

Unsurprisingly, this virtue focus has been largely absent from reformational accounts of pluralism and politics, symptomatic of wider trends.⁵¹ (To be fair, it has also been largely absent from liberal accounts of the same.) This is where legal scholar John Inazu’s new book, *Confident Pluralism*, makes an important new contribution to our discussion of pluralism and the public good. While Inazu attends to important systemic concerns about constitutional law and precedent (Part I of the book), he also rightly recognizes that forging a common life in the midst of deep directional diversity requires specific *dispositions* of tolerance, humility, and patience.⁵² Insofar as virtues are (good) habits, and habits are internal dispositions that are inscribed by imitation and practice, then these virtues of good citizenship can only be acquired by *formation* through immersion in social practices (as defined, say, by MacIntyre). But at least Inazu’s proposal is attentive to the necessity of formation in ways that, to date, Neocalvinist proposals have not. This appreciation for the importance of formation that raises two lines of inquiry.

1. First, it raises real challenges for the prospects of such virtue formation in a post-religious, “secularized” society. In short, there is a very hard question here for liberalism: Where does a generic, “secular” liberalism provide communities of practice where citizens can acquire the dispositions of tolerance, humility, and patience? Where, in a stratified, segmented society do citizens have the opportunity to “practice” encounter with, and tolerance of, difference? What story would orient them and motivate them to be patient? Who is going to teach them to be humble, and give them a reason why? Does a liberal pluralist society have what it *needs* to be what it *wants* to be?⁵³

⁵⁰ The utter implausibility of religious freedom to a rising generation of secularized liberals would be a case in point. Arguments for such policies are met with either blank, incomprehending stares or cynical dismissals of them as power plays.

⁵¹ Those trends would include at least two aspects: first, a kind of default “intellectualism” that yields a rather stunted picture of human agents as primarily deliberative and governed by rational concerns. (I have articulated a critique of this rationalist anthropology in *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013]. But one could also look to developments in behavioral economics [Richard Thaler, Cass Sunstein, et. al.] for alternative resources to make a similar point.) Second, and in part because of this default rationalism, Reformed ethics has tended to privilege deontology over virtue accounts. I have argued elsewhere that this is an unfortunate and unnecessary emphasis (see *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016].)

⁵² Inazu’s project is characterized by some ambiguity in this regard. Recognizing the challenge for a liberal society to inculcate virtues (since liberalism precludes identifying a substantive *telos* that is the precondition for virtue), Inazu describes these as “aspirations.” But the change of nomenclature doesn’t change the nature of what tolerance, patience, and humility *are*, especially since he recognizes them as “dispositions.” We are on the terrain of virtue here.

⁵³ Cp. Jeffrey Stout’s observation at the beginning of *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy*

As James Davison Hunter has commented: “There have never been ‘generic’ values.”⁵⁴ The issue is a kind of “sources of the self”⁵⁵ concern: Does a secularized, post-Christian, increasingly anti-religious society have the sources (formative communities) to engender the dispositions/virtues needed for “a modest unity” and a tolerant pluralism? In *The Fractured Republic*, Yuval Levin makes this point with a Tocquevillian angle: in many ways, the ideal of a pluralistic liberal society has lived off the borrowed (formative) capital of “illiberal” (mostly religious) communities—including the family—as incubators for the dispositions of good citizenship. But insofar as both liberalism and capitalism⁵⁶ tend to devour and erode just these institutions and communities, they end up being a parasite that consumes the host and thus engender their own demise, starved by their own hunger. This raises serious questions about the viability of pluralism *from the left* which has exhibited neither patience nor tolerance nor humility of late. While Christian political theologians continue to fret about the perceived threat of a Constantinian “take over,” in fact the most potent forces of hegemony and homogeneity have been progressives who are all too confident that they know the truth and thus disinclined to be tolerant of those who disagree, or to wait for them to catch up with ‘the right side of history.’ Thus pluralism is looking less and less like a *liberal* ideal. What if it is, in fact, religious⁵⁷ communities that are best able to articulate *why* we ought to be tolerant and have the resources to cultivate tolerant citizens?

2. This leads to a second line of inquiry once our consideration of pluralism starts to take into consideration the necessity of virtue formation: we can also ask whether/how Christian communities have (or can) be incubators of such dispositions/virtues. A first exercise might be to align Inazu’s aspirational virtues (tolerance, humility, patience) with the rhythms and rituals of historic Christian worship⁵⁸ and consider

in America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 9: “Skillful and virtuous citizens of any social class acquire their skills and virtues under specifiable conditions, as members of groups that gather people of good will, provide them with information, and cultivate their dispositions to behave well. The evidence that makes democracy seem like a foolish wager is best understood as evidence of how poorly organized, poorly trained people behave. The members of any social class, if poorly organized and poorly trained, are likely to behave irresponsibly and ineffectively.”

⁵⁴ Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 215.

⁵⁵ As developed in Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For a helpful elucidation of Taylor’s “method” here that puts him in conversation with Alvin Plantinga’s Reformed epistemology, see Deane-Peter Baker, *Tayloring Reformed Epistemology: Charles Taylor, Alvin Plantinga, and the de jure challenge to Christian belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁵⁶ “[C]apitalism depends upon some very demanding cultural preconditions and yet frequently undermines those very preconditions, so that its very preservation demands some limits on its freedom to shape society in its image.” Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America’s Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 103. This sort of push-back on the market should characterize a Neocalvinist social philosophy, since it is not only the state that can transgress its sphere.

⁵⁷ I use the term advisedly, since I don’t want to presume that *only* Christian communities can do this.

⁵⁸ Yes, that is an intentionally loaded phrase.

how/whether/why these emerge from the imaginary carried in liturgical practices. For example, we might consider how the Christian practice of confession engenders an epistemic humility that should characterize our public posture when we are “sent” from the sanctuary; or we might consider how the implicit eschatology of the Eucharist should engender, over time, a deep patience (and hope) that should temper any activist, Pelagian penchant to “take over;” or we might consider how the Prayers of the People are a way that even our enemies are brought into the purview of our concern by being brought before God in prayer; or we might consider how the lectionary is its own sort of epistemic discipline that confronts us with the whole counsel of God and thus won’t let us ignore widow, orphans, and immigrants. Etc., etc.

Now, I readily admit there has to be a self-critical moment of such an exercise that asks: *Does Christian worship do this? If not, why not?* Is it partly because Christian worship has been co-opted by other stories/liturgies? Other dynamics? Here is where I think both the “ecclesiology and ethnography” discussion (Christian Scharen., et. al.) is important, as well as the work of Willie Jennings on how the social imaginary of “whiteness” has been collapsed with Christianity.⁵⁹ The (albeit partial) renewal of good citizenship, then, would also depend on the renewal and reformation of the church.

Recognizing (and documenting) the way that Christian worship forms citizens *for* pluralism might be a way to counter the “religion-is-poison” narrative by out-narration, showing that it is in fact Christianity (and perhaps religious communities more broadly) that do the work of forming citizens for common life and the public good.⁶⁰ The irony would be that Christianity would remind society how to be (classically) liberal. That’s not meant to instrumentalize Christian formation as if that’s the point, but rather to recognize a kind of “by-product” that flows from the fact that the Gospel is how we learn to be human and the church is where we learn what a *polis* should look like. Thus the sort of “influence” we desire is not merely on the order of “political” truth, but in opening up the political to transcendent, “directional” truth of the Gospel, including the revelation of a risen, ascended King.⁶¹

⁵⁹ See Christian B. Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁶⁰ This, I think, is one of Jeffrey Stout’s conclusions—to his own surprise!—in *Blessed are the Organized*. Whereas in *Democracy and Tradition* he worried that Christians like MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and Milbank were encouraging Christian to exile themselves from democratic politics, in *Blessed Are the Organized* he recognizes the role religious congregations play in the grassroots democracy he extols. Commenting on the role of religious communities in the Industrial Areas Foundation, the confederation of community organizations founded by Saul Alinsky, Stout observes: “The number of synagogues, mosques, schools, and labor unions involved in IAF is growing, and organizers hope to hasten this trend. Still, if one subtracted the churches from IAF and other similar organizing networks, then grassroots democracy in the United States would come to very little” (4-5).

⁶¹ A key passage in Johnson’s *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism* is relevant here, and worth citing in full in order to comment: “[C]laims...that participation in the Heavenly City offers the only way for sinful differences to be reconciled and God-given differences to be celebrated, that

In this respect, there might also be a legitimate place for a Groen van Prinsterer-like⁶² critique of the way that unbelief engenders social configurations that *by nature* end up absolutizing one “direction” in ways that are intolerant, arrogant, and impatient.⁶³ In that sense, an affirmation of transcendence *might* (might!) be a condition for the dispositions that liberalism wants and that a “confident pluralism” needs—which would mean that challenging the default naturalism and secularism of society and the state would be precisely the way to call it toward being a better democratic, pluralistic society.

Finally, this would also reframe the *political* relevance of the church in ways that Neocalvinism has failed to articulate—not as a sphere-trumping institution that would reign over society, but as a habit-forming *polis* in which we gathered to be shaped and (re)formed by the Spirit in ways that make us good neighbors, even to our enemies.⁶⁴

participation in God provides the only means by which unity and diversity can be brought together in harmony, do not lead on to a political picture in which the ontology of Christianity takes over the political realm. Christianity does uniquely offer resolution to the problems that plague our political societies, problems that have led us to try to address the dilemmas left unresolved by both modern and post-Nietzschean attempts to create pluralist societies marked by tolerance and/or deep embrace of difference. But this resolution will not be fully visible this side of the eschaton, nor, with its understanding of sin and the *libido dominandi*, does it expect that any earthly city could [fully?] reflect the realities of the Heavenly City. It hopes, of course, that citizens of the earthly city will become citizens of the Heavenly City, finding through participating in the Triune God the community, the peace, the justice, and the love that many had hoped to find in the earthly city. It cares for the earthly city and its members, offering, at least ideally, service that is not marred by lust for glory and power, in joint pursuit of goods which the Heavenly City shares with the earthly city while it is on its pilgrimage. And it influences how citizens view and contribute to earthly justice and peace through its understanding of heavenly justice and peace. But...it does not seek the [complete?] realization of its picture of reconciliation, or any picture of complete restoration, in the earthly city. Indeed, its role in reminding the earthly city to limit its ambitions and be realistic about its aspirations is a crucial one” (pp. 184-185). Here Johnson walks the fine line I am commending to Neocalvinism. In particular, I commend the way that evangelization is woven in the political hopes of this account in the *hope* “that citizens of the earthly city will become citizens of the Heavenly City.” We Neocalvinists are sometimes embarrassed to talk like that, and that is a problem. I would also note, however, the precisely because Johnson is right here, she should also temper her persistent worries about “take over” in the rest of the book. While there are legitimate concerns about an institutional confusion whereby the state becomes subservient to the state, we can nonetheless hope—as she herself affirms—that our vision will *influence* society widely, even capture the imagination of a nation. We must be careful not to unwittingly buy into the “autonomism” of liberalism that effectively makes any sort of “influence” an unjust imposition on individual autonomy.

⁶² You could probably generate a similar argument using an Eric Voegelin machine.

⁶³ Cp. Jody Bottum’s *An Anxious Age*.

⁶⁴ I make a similar point in my discussion of Eric Gregory’s *Politics and the Order of Love* in James K.A. Smith, “Formation, Grace, and Pneumatology: Or, Where’s the Spirit in Gregory’s Augustine?,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39 (2011): 556-569.