

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 32 | Number 3

Article 1

---

March 2004

## Defining "Public Justice" in a Pluralistic Society: Probing a Key Neo-Calvinist Insight

Jonathan Chaplin

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chaplin, Jonathan (2004) "Defining "Public Justice" in a Pluralistic Society: Probing a Key Neo-Calvinist Insight," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 32: No. 3, 1 - 11.  
Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol32/iss3/1](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol32/iss3/1)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Defining “Public Justice” in a Pluralistic Society:<sup>1</sup>

## Probing a Key Neo-Calvinist Insight

---



by Jonathan Chaplin

The French political theorist Anthony de Jasay opens his book, *The State*, with an arresting question: “What would you do if *you* were the state?” De Jasay is not asking what platform you would run on if you were running for elected office but the more difficult question of what *criteria* you, if you imagined yourself as the institutional agent called “the state,” would employ in deciding how to act. He goes on as follows:

It is odd that political theory, at least since Machiavelli, has practically ceased asking this question. It has devoted much thought to what the

individual subject, a class or an entire society can get out of the state, to the legitimacy of its commands and the rights its subjects retain in the face of them.... These are vitally important matters.... Is it, however, sufficient to treat them only from the point of view of the *subject*, what he needs, wants, can and ought to do? Would not our understanding become more complete if we could also see them as they might look from the *state's* point of view?<sup>2</sup>

This assertion finds a powerful echo in the political thinking generated by the Reformed tradition, especially its neo-Calvinist wing. That tradition opposes individualist or subjectivist approaches to politics, which look to the state merely as a guarantor of individual interests, preferences, or rights, and views it instead as a community with a normative structure and calling. Representatives of this tradition urge us to take the reality of the state as an institutional agent with full seriousness and to ask ourselves how we, as active members of the state—as citizens—should frame its central normative purposes. A wide range of resources is available to assist us in doing so.<sup>3</sup>

De Jasay’s own response to his opening question is shaped by a very influential methodology in political science and public policy-making, namely rational choice theory. That methodology supposes that criteria for what states should do can be identified by analogy with the choices that a rational, self-interested individual might make, given a determinate set of resources and constraints. This supposition, I believe, is a deeply-flawed approach to the project of framing the normative purposes of the state. Nevertheless, de Jasay’s question is precisely the one we need to ask today as our states undergo structural transformations

---

*Jonathan Chaplin, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Political Theory at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto.*

on a scale we have not yet seen.

Writers in the Reformed tradition answer that question against the comprehensive background of a biblical vision of creation, sin, redemption, and human nature. The complex institution we have come to call “the state” is neither merely a means for sustaining social order nor an arbitrary social construct nor a mere instrument of individual self-interest; rather, it is a historical response to the inescapable imperative arising with ourselves for just public relationships, an imperative rooted in the divinely created structure of human social order and reaffirmed in redemption. Political community exists to secure, for human beings, a lawful arrangement of their public interactions, embodying the requirements of justice. The defining purpose of political authority is the constitution of a community embodying what many in the neo-Calvinist community have come to call “public justice.”

On this view, if you were the state—at least if you correctly grasped the nature of your calling—you would not be preoccupied with institutional survival or expansion, nor with defending your own “national” interests against supposed competitors, nor with redesigning your society from the top down according to some comprehensive ideological plan, nor with trying to get away with doing as little as possible on the mistaken assumption that the best government is the least government. Rather, you would be reflecting in a deep and sustained way on how to put in place a web of just public relationships within which your citizens, as individual persons and in their multiple and diverse relationships, communities, and associations, could flourish in freedom and responsibility. “Public justice” would be your guiding principle, whether you were deliberating on welfare reform, monetary policy, environmental pollution, or strategic defence. From a neo-Calvinist perspective, the awesome task facing Christian citizenship today, in all its many manifestations, is to bend every effort to nudge the states with which we actually live a little bit closer to that divine calling.

The principle of “public justice” has become the cornerstone of much neo-Calvinist reflection on politics—two organizations have emerged from Reformed circles with this phrase in their name<sup>4</sup>—but what exactly does it mean? Surprisingly, while many will be familiar with the broad pattern of policy preferences that emerge from applying this prin-

ciple, relatively little explicit reflection has been devoted to elaborating its implications. This lack of explicit reflection may be one reason why, notwithstanding this shared policy territory, significantly contrasting specific policy stances have been espoused by different neo-Calvinist thinkers and groups, each claiming justification in terms of the same principle.<sup>5</sup> Such divergences cannot be wholly avoided and, to some extent, may reflect a healthy complementarity. They certainly cannot be removed merely by a process of conceptual clarification. But delving into the meaning of the key phrase “public justice” may at least help towards constructive dialogue among adherents of diverging interpretations. Each of the two terms in the phrase “public justice” has a precise meaning which invites fuller elaboration, and I want to offer my own reading of what they imply. I begin with the idea of “justice.”

### **The Meaning of “Justice” in “Public Justice”**

It has been a hallmark of classical Protestant political thought to designate the divinely established purpose of the state as the establishment of “justice.”<sup>6</sup> Typically, this designation has referred to the function of “retributive justice” alluded to in Romans 13, although even early on some Protestant writers, notably those on the more radical wing of the Reformation (within which I include early Calvinism and Puritanism), also included elements of what we have come to call “social justice.” Some contemporary evangelical Protestants have revived and deepened this tradition and, partly in response to the gauntlet thrown down by liberation theology, have reminded us that biblical justice involves much more than mere criminal retribution; it also involves a satisfaction of the basic material needs of human beings, especially for the poor.<sup>7</sup> Justice has also always been central to the Catholic understanding of the purpose of the state, though this purpose is conceived more capaciously as promoting “the common good,” with justice as one of its central dimensions rather than as the uniquely definitive purpose of the state. A useful distinction is then often made between just relations among individuals—commutative justice—and just relations across different sectors of society—distributive justice.

Designating the state’s purpose as the promotion of “justice,” in its various modes, carries, therefore, a long historical pedigree in Christian thought.

However, as it functions within the neo-Calvinist perspective, the content of “justice” has come to be fleshed out in the light of distinctive, *pluralistic* social theory which seeks to give priority to a recognition of many different kinds of legitimate social relationship, community, and association, and the rights and responsibilities attaching to them. While it affirms the indispensable importance of individual rights and duties, it also seeks to honour those of parents, families, churches, schools, corporations, unions, and many other social bodies, as well as to encompass the many diverse kinds of relationship among them, such as those constituting highly complex webs of interaction like “markets.”

Adherents to this social theory therefore rejoice that the reductionist liberal<sup>8</sup> polarization between state and individual, which has enfeebled political thinking for so long, is now being superseded by a richer account of the linkages among the state, the market, and civil society. Yet even that account they find wanting because of its liability to overlook some of the vitally important qualitative distinctions between very different entities falling within these catch-all categories, such as that between charitable bodies and churches, both of which are lumped together as “institutions of civil society,” or that between profit-making and non-profit enterprises, a distinction concealed if the single term “market” is used. The neo-Calvinist insistence is that *every one* of the types of social body just mentioned deserves recognition *on its own terms*, and that each contains its own unique domain of rights, duties, and authorities—its own “sphere of justice,” to use Michael Walzer’s phrase,<sup>9</sup> or its own “sphere sovereignty,” to invoke Abraham Kuyper’s.<sup>10</sup> This model also enables the various modes of justice I mentioned earlier—retributive, commutative, distributive, social, and so on—to be situated within a coherent framework that resists attempts to reduce justice to only one of these modes. To my mind, a large part of the appeal of a neo-Calvinist concept of justice is that it provides the best prospect of a comprehensive account of these multiple spheres and modes of justice.<sup>11</sup>

The model is not, of course, without its detractors. Let me mention briefly just one reservation sometimes entered against it. An important assumption undergirding much of the social and political analysis of neo-Calvinist thinking, especially that influenced by the writings of Herman Dooyeweerd, is the

idea that institutional “differentiation” is an inherently good thing.<sup>12</sup> For example, James Skillen frequently refers to our society as “differentiated” and to the state as a “differentiated state.”<sup>13</sup> The term refers to the phenomenon of institutional autonomy that, as many social theorists have observed, seems to mark the modern age in comparison to pre-modern societies. For example, in the past, kinship groups would exercise economic functions; churches, landed interests, or craft guilds would perform political functions; political rulers would wield ecclesial powers; families would arrange marriages; and so forth. In modern society, by contrast, each of

---

*To my mind, a large part of the appeal of a neo-Calvinist concept of justice is that it provides the best prospect of a comprehensive account of these multiple spheres and modes of justice.*

---

these diverse social functions has come to be designated to separate institutions, each operating largely independently of the others. Specific social functions are now correlated to specific institutions with a degree of clarity and continuity not seen in earlier cultures.

Neo-Calvinists like Kuyper and Dooyeweerd regard this state of affairs not simply as some contingent Western historical development but as an expression of the historical unfolding of our many-sided divine callings. The plural structure of our modern society reveals the multifaceted character of our being made in the image of God.<sup>14</sup> However, this notion of differentiation has evoked the charge that the biblical story of human cultural unfolding—the human response to the cultural mandate—is here being read through the filter of an essentially Western, modernist interpretation of historical development.<sup>15</sup> For does it not seem to imply, so the criticism goes, that cultures which are less differentiated than Western civilization are culturally immature, even perhaps less able to image God? Evaluating particular cultures according to the norm

of differentiation can be a hazardous enterprise, and more work needs to be done to detach that norm from a possible Eurocentric bias. Most of us would be fairly certain that the independence of the church from state control would everywhere be a healthy development, and that some version of constitutional democracy is likely to deliver relatively more justice and stability than other governmental forms.<sup>16</sup> However, in the light of current Western levels of divorce, can we be entirely confident any more that the institution of arranged marriages leads to less healthy marriages than we have in the West? Or, against the background of escalating levels of Western social inequality, can we go on complacently assuming that the concentration of economic activity within the extended family or local community or “guild” is necessarily less conducive to economic flourishing—as distinct from mere profit—than the capitalist enterprise? Such questions can only be adequately addressed with substantial input from non-Western Christians.<sup>17</sup>

In any event, the point I want to stress here can be supported even by those who cannot entirely endorse the notion of differentiation as found in neo-Calvinist political writings. That notion rests on a particular Christian philosophy of historical development. My central point concerns how we assess the institutions that we currently live with. It is that, whatever else justice in our own society might imply, it certainly involves honoring all the distinctive responsibilities and rights arising from the plural institutions of society. Recognising this plurality distributes power and authority across many centres of society and so helps preempt illicit and oppressive concentrations of power in any one center, especially, in Western societies, the economy or the polity; or, in “traditional” societies, especially the family, tribe, or religious community. It also secures many avenues of personal and social responsibility so that persons and communities can flourish in diverse ways corresponding to the multifaceted possibilities of human nature.

But what precisely are the distinct responsibilities and rights arising from the plural institutions of society? Unless we can answer this question with some degree of specificity, designating the task of the state as “promoting justice” won’t supply us any meaningful guidelines for what states should do. Justice cannot be understood primarily as a procedural mat-

ter or as a derivation from individual rights or as a codeword for equality or as “respecting difference” (though it may include elements of all of the above). The content of justice, in this perspective, is given by the legitimate responsibilities and rights of individuals, their plural communities and associations, and those arising from the complex and diverse interactions between each of these. So to know what *political* justice means—what the role of the state is—we have to understand the normative design of a plural *society*, to discern what kinds of relationships and activities are conducive to a flourishing human social life, and what rights and responsibilities promote that flourishing. Certainly, working out the idea of a normative design is inescapably demanding and controversial in a society characterised by deep spiritual and moral dissensus, a point to which I shall return.

### **The Meaning of “Public” in “Public Justice”**

As is evident above, we already have our work cut out in clarifying the meaning of the term “justice.” Our workload is not lightened when we attempt to put some meaning into the term “public.” The point of qualifying the justice for which the state is responsible as “public” justice is to indicate in a more explicit way both the scope of and the limits to its legitimate authority. Many issues of justice pertaining to interpersonal relationships or within independent communities or associations, and many others besides, are properly dealt with by the agents concerned and involve no recourse to political authority. For example, when parents decide on the choice of school for their children, it is *prima facie* illegitimate for public officials to gainsay that essentially familial choice. And when private businesses decide on the price of a product, no government, *prima facie*, has the competence to override that essentially economic judgment. The specific “sphere of justice” associated with different kinds of community or association defines a space in which the state should have no direct legal authority (which is not to say that a community or association is exhausted in its sphere of justice, as I shall soon point out). These spheres of justice fall outside the public competence of the state.

The term “public” is employed routinely in law-making, public policy, and judicial adjudication, often in the context of an appeal to “the public interest.”

Yet the term cannot be defined independently of some larger political theory within which it functions and which shapes its concrete employment. In classical political thought, for example, the public realm was regarded as including virtually everything that fell outside the domestic sphere of the household. With that expansive definition, much of what businesses, universities, and even churches do today would be in line for potential state control. The way the term functions in neo-Calvinist treatments, however, suggests a much tighter circumscription: the public realm is that which falls outside not merely the household but also the internal spheres of all the multiple communities and associations that make up the plural structure of society, as well as outside the sphere of individual freedom. With this view, what qualifies as public space is relativized as the many non-political expressions of our social nature move into the foreground.

But, some might ask, isn't this simply a Christian pluralist gloss on an essentially liberal definition, in which an over-extended private realm forces the public realm to the margins? Have we not capitulated to an eviscerated individualist notion of the public? I think not, for two reasons. First, the "private sphere" is not just the sphere of the individual but also a social sphere, a realm of multiple, independent communities and associations and relational networks. Second, in this view the public realm is not simply defined negatively as what is left over after we take away the rights of individuals and communities; it also implies a positive task of establishing an enabling environment that other social bodies cannot supply.<sup>18</sup> The "public interest" is not the sum of private interests but rather one of the essential conditions for the flourishing of those interests. Indeed, a searching claim made by Skillen is that an individualist definition itself harbours potentially statist tendencies: "while libertarian individualists argue for a minimalist government that maximizes individual freedom regardless of inequalities, liberals at the other end of the spectrum can support extensive governmental action that 'interferes' in any area of life whatsoever to expand the autonomy and equality of every individual. In other words, the individualist foundation recognizes no boundaries for government except individual freedom...."<sup>19</sup>

In the wake of two decades of what I think can only be described as aggressive social engineering

by movements of the New Right, I think we must go further and say that even libertarian (or neo-liberal) individualists, contrary to their professed desire to minimize government, are often ineluctably drawn to endorsing big government in order to police the socially disruptive consequences of what Pope John Paul II, in his marvellous encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, calls the "idolatry" of the market.<sup>20</sup> This "idolatry" explains why what he condemns as a "radical capitalist ideology" can go hand in hand with an enthusiasm for more public spending on and a more aggressive deployment of police, prisons, and the military. And it also helps explain how a

---

*The public realm refers to that social space within which individuals and communities or associations interact with each other in ways that transcend their own unique rights and responsibilities.*

---

well-intentioned desire to slim government down can, paradoxically, bring about the increased centralization of the public sector. This "idolatry" explains why a former British enthusiast of Thatcherism (Simon Jenkins), now turning, disillusioned, to an older, more organic form of conservatism, can write a book entitled *Accountable to None: The Tory Nationalization of Britain*.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in Skillen's words, the neo-Calvinist notion of the scope of the "public" realm is neither a classical Greek nor a liberal individualist one: "the political community is neither the all-embracing whole of human self-realization... nor an unnatural intrusion upon freedom."<sup>22</sup> The public realm refers to that social space within which individuals and communities or associations interact with each other in ways that transcend their own unique rights and responsibilities.

However, at what point do we enter the public realm? This entry point is impossible to determine in an *aprioristic* way, but we might put it this way: no human activities are ever absolutely beyond the scope of the public realm, but that realm does not go "all the way down." It does not envelope the unique

“spheres of justice” of individuals and the various social bodies, but embraces only one specific dimension—the public dimension—of such activities. So while parents can choose their children’s school, they do not exercise absolute sovereignty over their children—as was more or less the case in the ancient Roman *pater familias*. They must, for example, respect the physical and emotional integrity of their children, and where this integrity is seriously violated, a *public* offence has been committed that will require action by the state. To put this point differently, we could say that children’s rights to physical and emotional integrity do not derive from the *family’s internal sphere* of justice but from the *children’s public status as citizens*. So when the arm of the state removes a child from an abusive family, it is not interfering in the internal rights of the family—no family has the right to abuse its children—but simply requiring parents to respect their children’s public rights.

Likewise, businesses may determine pricing, production methods, and so forth, but they do not exercise absolute sovereignty over their employees—as at times appeared to be the case in the mid-nineteenth-century industrial England from which Karl Marx drew much of his incriminating evidence. Businesses may not, for example, compel employees to work excessive hours or dismiss them at will; and today many governments have judged that businesses may not pay employees less than a minimally decent wage. When restrictions on such supposed absolute economic sovereignty were progressively introduced into Western states, some employers and their philosophical advocates cried foul and accused governments of encroaching on their economic freedom. Regrettably, some who claim to represent a neo-Calvinist view of the economy today still echo that secularised, libertarian capitalist cry. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II reiterates the historic reply of orthodox Christian social thought to such a shrivelled notion of freedom: “freedom in the economic sector [must be] circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it *at the service of human freedom in its totality*....”<sup>23</sup> I think we should read this as a more formal statement of the old and more evocative adage that “freedom for the pike is death for the minnows.” Earlier popes might have said that “commutative justice” should be balanced by “distributive justice.” To use Skillen’s illuminat-

ing metaphor, we could say that the economic freedom of the entrepreneur or shareholder must be “interwoven” with the claims of other stakeholders under the norm of public justice: “[P]ublic justice means that everything interwoven in the public order maintains rather than loses its unique identity, jurisdiction, competence, and authority before God. The metaphor of ... interweaving suggests that the distinct colors and textures of the different threads being interwoven are all maintained.” And this interweaving must occur in such a way that “the public commons must not be stolen or dominated by one organization or group in society nor controlled by one or another interest group for private advantage.”<sup>24</sup>

The purpose of the state, then, is given by the principle of public justice: issues of justice arising within the public realm are matters which the state *must* address in some way. Those pertaining to the spheres of justice of non-political bodies fall outside its competence, as indeed do issues that may have public scope but which evoke no questions of justice (changing fashions, for instance). The seminal neo-Calvinist insight at stake here is that the authority of the state is “universal” yet not “exhaustive” or “omnicompetent.” It is universal—it doesn’t stop at the factory gate; but it is not omnicompetent—it must respect genuine entrepreneurial freedom even when addressing issues of public justice arising within the factory gates.<sup>25</sup> We might say that the scope of the state’s competence is *extensive*—it in principle can touch any area of society—but not *intensive*—it may not compromise the irreducible, non-transferrable authority of a social institution arising from its “sphere sovereignty.”

Precisely how the process of political interweaving takes place is a highly complex question, but something needs to be said about the process because this process of interweaving is where concrete questions of public policy *start*. For those who find themselves impatient for policy outcomes and restless with the elaboration of principles, it should be noted that merely *positing* the norm of public justice is not supposed to tell us what to do but is supposed to put us to work in devising policy stances that make it concrete. It is sometimes said that neo-Calvinism is more prone to the peddling of abstract principles than are most other religious traditions, and there is some truth in this charge.<sup>26</sup> However, the policy indeterminacy of a principle like public justice is a feature of

normative political principles in every political tradition. For example, socialist believers in the normative principle of social equality do not think that detailed policy prescriptions flow directly out of that principle, and, indeed, socialists disagree on whether it implies a commitment to state ownership of the economy. Similarly, traditionalist conservative believers in the principle of social order do not assume that this principle instructs them in the details of how to reform a constitution.<sup>27</sup> Normative political principles are guideposts, not blueprints. Those who find “public justice” to be an illuminating principle for political action will need much more than a clear understanding of its definition when they engage in political action. They will need a sound grasp of the empirical complexities, possibilities, and limits of their own political system and of the diverse currents of political opinion with which they will necessarily find themselves in dialogue. They will also need a firm hold on the techniques of political action. It is true that contemporary democratic politics is increasingly being reduced to the profoundly unhealthy—and undemocratic—techniques of opinion manipulation, logrolling, and fundraising. However, like every other sphere of social activity, politics does indeed have a technical side: how to develop a policy initiative, when to launch it, how to publicize and defend it, whom to work with, and so on. Christian participants need to master these skills as much as anyone else does.

There has been a tendency within neo-Calvinist political thought to focus on broad legislative or constitutional objectives at the national level. But it is important to recognise that the implementation of public justice by the state will, and already does, occur at many points in the political system and will take numerous forms.<sup>28</sup> Public justice should govern action at local, state, federal, and indeed trans-national levels,<sup>29</sup> and such public justice should be the aim of actions taken by executive, legislative, judicial, and other organs at all those levels. The seeming impossibility of passing a fundamental statute or constitutional amendment on, say, religious freedom, abortion, or social welfare should not prevent citizens and their organizations from working through other routes potentially available to achieve similar objectives (and more such routes exist in the decentralized American political system than in more centralized systems like Canada or the

UK). And in each level or organ, work toward public justice can require many different instruments: constraints, commands, empowerments, conditions, provisions, benefits, entitlements, and so forth. In addition, statecraft guided by public justice should also explore how the structure of state institutions themselves need to be recrafted, such as by opening

---

*Those who find “public justice” to be an illuminating principle for political action will need much more than a clear understanding of its definition when they engage in political action.*

---

up new avenues of representation for those alienated or effectively disenfranchised by the current system. Which concrete route or proposal is most likely to bring about a just public outcome is a matter of prudential judgment that takes all circumstances into account.

In Christian thought, however, “prudence” is not regarded as a morally neutral art that can be invoked to bypass conflicts of principle, as if governing were merely a matter of technique. Different political theories will weight each of the above elements very differently according to their particular ideological biases. Neo-conservatives and neo-liberals, for example, will favour local and state levels over federal and trans-national levels, judicial adjudication over statute or executive discretion, empowerments and entitlements over constraints and benefits, and so on. What these ideologically-based differences imply is that a major component of the statecraft called for by a public-justice perspective will be the nurturing of a Christian political prudence, one formed through the seasoned, corporate political experience of addressing concrete issues like welfare reform in the light of a public-justice approach. Such statecraft will strive to avoid the neo-liberal distortion I just indicated as well as those characteristic of liberal egalitarianism or traditionalist conservatism or any other blinkered reading of that design of society which expresses the just and gracious rule of God.

## Conclusion

Let me return to—only to leave wide open—the dilemma of how Christians might contribute to public debate on legally defining the distinctive rights and responsibilities of the multiple social structures of a plural society, those of schools, families, churches, unions, and the state itself. Is it possible to approach a workable democratic consensus on what the role of government is in relation to all of these, in a society marked by deep moral and spiritual *dissensus*? Our society is characterised not only by institutional or structural pluralism—a plurality of distinct kinds of social body—but also by religious or confessional pluralism—a plurality of spiritual and moral perspectives on many fundamental questions, *including* the nature of that very structural plurality.<sup>30</sup>

As I remarked above, the rights and responsibilities of distinct social bodies cannot simply be unproblematically read off social reality. Indeed according to the dominant perspective in social theory today, these rights and responsibilities cannot be read *off* reality at all but only read *into* reality, since they are purely contingent social constructions.<sup>31</sup> Constructivists affirm the valid insight, shared by neo-Calvinism, that social institutions are widely variable products of historical human action, while they deny that such action is a response to norms arising from the created design of human nature. Deconstructionists go further by insisting that social institutions not only are entirely human constructions but also necessarily serve to perpetuate systematically unjust power-relations. They too grasp a vitally important point that is affirmed by neo-Calvinism and that ought to be affirmed more consistently: social institutions can be established as, or be distorted into, structures of oppression, illegitimate violence, or exclusion.<sup>32</sup> Unlike deconstructionists, neo-Calvinists explain these distortions as a consequence of the ubiquity of human sinfulness, humankind's rebellion against the normative design of created order. Both have reason to expect deep and pervasive distortions in even our apparently most human social structures. However, the core deconstructionist charge—that all social structures are necessarily and ineradicably premised on violence and oppression—forceful though it is, is ultimately self-defeating if applied consistently to all social constructions: the accusation of injustice against a

particular social power-relation can only stand if there is some benchmark of what a *just* power relation would look like.<sup>33</sup> So, notwithstanding their denials, even deconstructionists end up having to take an implicit position on what a normative distribution of social authorities would be.<sup>34</sup>

In any event, judgments on such issues are increasingly controversial, as the intensity of the debates, for example, over the public status of same-sex unions<sup>35</sup> or the nature of a fair global trading regime<sup>36</sup> make abundantly clear. In such a context, Christians must, on the one hand, hold on tenaciously to the universal intent of their claims: we are, after all, seeking to give some account (however provisional and open to challenge) of the structure of the order of creation, not simply informing outsiders of our own religious preferences. However, we can hardly fail to notice that against the contemporary background of radical confessional pluralism, those universal claims are increasingly *looking like*, at best, just one more proclamation of local, narrative particularity or, at worst, just one more self-serving interest-group demand.

In the light of these generalizations, Christian political practitioners and thinkers need to acquire not only a steady nerve and sure faith but also sophisticated skills of inter-confessional civic dialogue and democratic coalition-building. This is the worst possible moment to retreat into a defeatist isolation in which we aspire only to keep a flicker of truth alive within an ecclesial community preoccupied with mutual consolation. Nor is this a time to seek *deliberately* to stoke up culture wars in order to precipitate some sort of political cataclysm that, we wager, might trigger a moment of national conversion. It is a time for sustaining our vision, steadying our nerve, working for approximations of justice in the avenues that still remain open to us, and then living each day in the light of the hope that beckons us forward.

But what realistic prospect exists of reaching political agreement, never mind moral consensus, on some of the contested questions that currently wrack the body politic? The first thing to say is that this is not a problem only for neo-Calvinist pluralists (although it has to be admitted that they do make work for themselves by laying out such a complex arrangement of social furniture). Second, the divergence of perspectives arising from confessional

pluralism is far from complete: we must identify and nurture whatever areas of agreement still survive. And, third, we have reason to believe that such confessional divergence will never be complete: the very structures of created order, revealing themselves within the inclinations and hopes of human beings everywhere, are continually sustained by God and so, to some degree, are potentially recognisable by all, whatever their confessional perspective. It is, therefore, eminently worth devoting time and energy to political dialogue with those with whom we have profound confessional disagreements, whether secular liberals or orthodox Moslems. And it also goes without saying that as Reformed Christians engage in this dialogue, they will be able and will need to learn from and cooperate with Christians from many other confessional traditions (as Kuyper himself discovered over a century ago).

Although we may increasingly feel that we are a community in exile, we still have powerful reasons for “seeking the welfare of the city” in which we currently dwell. As we seek to discern the contours of that welfare, we will need thousands of passionately committed and politically streetwise Christian citizens, activists, and thinkers to devote themselves to this patient, painstaking task. May the Lord of the harvest of justice send out many laborers into his harvest, for the gathering in may soon be upon us.

#### ENDNOTES

1. This article is a revised version of my response to James W. Skillen’s 2000 Kuyper Lecture, “American Statecraft: A New Art for the 21st Century,” September 29, Washington, D.C. Skillen’s lecture can be obtained from the Center for Public Justice ([www.cpjjustice.org](http://www.cpjjustice.org)). Some quotations below are taken from a longer, unpublished draft of Skillen’s lecture and are used with permission.
2. Anthony de Jasay, *The State* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 1.
3. Representative works include David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Paul Marshall, *God and the Constitution: Christianity and American Politics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Jonathan Chaplin, “Faith in the State: The Promise and Perils of Christian Politics” (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 2000); Michael Cromartie, ed., *Caesar’s Coin Revisited: Christians and the Limits of Government* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Washington, D.C.: EPPC, 1996); James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994); Gerald Vandezande, *Justice, Not Just Us: Faith Perspectives and National Priorities* (Toronto: Public Justice Resources Centre, 1999); John L. Hiemstra, *Worldviews on the Air: The Struggle to Create a Pluralistic Broadcasting System in the Netherlands* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997); Timothy R. Sherrat & Ronald P. Mahurin, *Saints as Citizens: A Guide to Public Responsibilities for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Jonathan P. Chaplin & Paul Marshall, eds., *Political Theory and Christian Vision: Essays in Memory of Bernard Zylstra* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994); Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); and other titles listed below. All of these works are indebted to the political writings of Abraham Kuyper; cf. especially, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), ch. 3; James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); excerpts from Kuyper in James W. Skillen & Rockne M. McCarthy, eds., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1991). Contrasting interpretations of Kuyper’s social and political stances can be found in Peter Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); and Luis E. Lugo, ed., *Religion, Pluralism and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper’s Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
4. The Center for Public Justice in the USA (formerly operating as the Association for Public Justice), and Citizens for Public Justice in Canada (formerly the Committee for Justice and Liberty) ([www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca)), which now works closely with the related organization Public Justice Resource Centre. Both CPJs have done outstanding work in exploring and applying the meaning of public justice. While founded within Reformed circles, each in its own way now incorporates insights from wider ecumenical sources.
5. For an intriguing account of parallel policy divergences among advocates of a “public justice” perspective in the Netherlands, see James C. Kennedy, “The Problem of Kuyper’s Legacy: The Crisis of the Anti-Revolutionary Party in Post-War

- Holland, "Markets and Morality 5, no. 1 (2002): 45-56. Similar though less pronounced contrasts are evident between the social policy stances of CPJ-USA and CPJ-Canada. Compare, on the one hand, the CPJ-USA approach as found in James W. Skillen, "The Question of Being Human in Assessing the Requirements of Welfare Policy Reform," in Stanley Carlson-Thies and James W. Skillen, eds., *Welfare in America: Christian Perspectives on a Policy in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 119-144, and the Appendix to that book, "A New Vision for Welfare Reform"; and, on the other hand, three contributions representing the orientations of CPJ-Canada: Stephanie Baker-Collins, "Defining Poverty Through the Welfare Debate: Limitations for Policy and Program Response," in Carlson-Thies and Skillen, eds., *ibid.*; Gerald Vandezande, *Justice, Not Just Us; and A Social Justice Kit*, Citizens for Public Justice/Christian Reformed Church in Canada (2003).
6. For a major twentieth-century Protestant statement emerging outside of, but nevertheless closely parallel to, neo-Calvinism, see Emil Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945).
  7. See, for example, Stephen C. Mott, *A Christian Perspective on Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), ch. 5. For an explanation of how this wider understanding of the role of government is implicit also in Romans 13, cf. Marshall, *God and the Constitution*, ch. 3, and Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), ch. 2.
  8. I am referring here not specifically to those on the left of the American political spectrum but to those whose thinking has been shaped by the tradition of liberal political philosophy, of which American liberals are only one local and relatively recent manifestation.
  9. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
  10. His classic statement, from 1880, is "Sphere Sovereignty," in Bratt, ed., 461-490.
  11. For critical assessments of this neo-Calvinist concept, see Luis Lugo, ed., *Religion, Pluralism and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); and several contributors to *Markets and Morality*, op. cit.
  12. Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979/Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), ch. 3.
  13. Cf. *Recharging*.
  14. For a substantial statement of this idea, cf. Rockne McCarthy et al, *Society, State and Schools: A Case for Structural and Confessional Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), ch. 6.
  15. Cf., e.g., C. T. McIntire, "Dooyeweerd's Philosophy of History," in C. T. McIntire, ed., *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 81-117.
  16. This view is compellingly defended in James W. Skillen, "Politics in One World," *Philosophia Reformata* 66 (2001): 117-131.
  17. Cf., for example, responses to Skillen, *ibid.*, by Yusufu Turaki and Jeong-Kii Min in the same issue of *Philosophia Reformata*, and the various other contributions to that issue, the theme of which is "Cultures and Christianity."
  18. Stanley Carlson-Thies develops a parallel point with greater specificity in "Towards a Christian Social Policy," his response to the 1997 Kuyper Lecture by Senator Dan Coats. Cf. Dan Coats, *Mending Fences: Renewing Justice Between Government and Civil Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker/Washington, D.C.: Center for Public Justice, 1998), 63-73.
  19. Unpublished first draft of his 2000 Kuyper lecture, 24-25.
  20. *Centesimus Annus* (Boston: Pauline Books), para. 40.
  21. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995.
  22. Unpublished first draft of his 2000 Kuyper lecture, 28.
  23. *Op. cit.*, para. 42. Emphasis added.
  24. Unpublished first draft of his 2000 Kuyper lecture.
  25. For an exploration of the implications of "sphere sovereignty" for the modern economy, cf. Ray Pennings, "Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty and Modern Economic Institutions," in *Comment* (Winter, 2003). This journal is published by the Work Research Foundation ([www.wrf.ca/comment](http://www.wrf.ca/comment)). Cf. also the Spring 2003 issue for reflections on labour (Calvin Seerveld) and globalization (Jonathan Chaplin).
  26. Cf. the comparative historical analysis in Mark Noll, "A Century of Christian Social Teaching: The Legacy of Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper," in *Markets and Morality*, 137-156; and the collegial critique of CPJ-USA in John L. Hiemstra, "Doing Analysis as Service on 'The Way': The Social Policy Analysis of the Center for Public Justice," in Carlson-Thies and Skillen, eds., *Welfare in America*, 368-390.
  27. For a penetrating analysis, inspired by neo-Calvinist insights, of political ideologies like these, cf. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions*.
  28. This point is made in various ways in Timothy Sherratt, "Rehabilitating the State in America: Abraham Kuyper's Overlooked Contribution," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 29 no. 2 (1999): 323-346; and Douglas Koopman, "Reformed Christian Scholarship and American Politics," *Christian Scholar's Review* 29 no. 3 (2000): 589-608.
  29. For helpful suggestions on the trans-national application of neo-Calvinist thought (a neglected area

- in English-language writings from this tradition), cf. Johan Van der Vyver, "The Jurisprudential Legacy of Abraham Kuyper and Leo XIII," *Markets and Morality*, 211-249; Lugo, ed., *Pluralism and Public Life*, Pt. V; Marshall, *God and the Constitution*, ch. 8; Luis E. Lugo, ed., *Sovereignty at the Crossroads: Morality and International Politics in the Post-Cold War Era* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), chs. 1, 2, 6; Mark T. Mitchell, "A Theology of Engagement for the 'Newest Internationalists'," *The Brandywine Review of Faith and International Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 11-19; James W. Skillen, *International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice* (Sioux Center, Ia.: Dordt College Press, 1981).
30. Cf. Skillen, *Recharging, passim*. It is also increasingly marked by "cultural pluralism," or what Mouw and Griffioen term "contextual pluralism." Cf. Mouw and Griffioen. This is a neglected theme in neo-Calvinist political thought. For initial pointers, indicating again contrasting interpretations of a pluralist approach indebted to "public justice," see James H. Olthuis, ed., *Towards an Ethics of Community: Negotiations of Difference in a Pluralist Society* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2000).
31. For useful discussions of the prevailing constructivist paradigm in social theory, cf. Elaine Botha, "Prospects for Christian Social Philosophy in a Shrinking World," in Lugo, ed., *Religion, Pluralism and Public Life*, 221-240, and Brad Breems, "The Service of Sociology: Providing a Lighter Cloak or a Sturdier Iron Cage?" in John H. Kok, ed., *Marginal Resistance: Essays Dedicated to John C. Vander Stelt* (Sioux Center, Ia.: Dordt College Press, 2001), 253-272.
32. For a critical discussion of neo-Calvinist complacency on this score, formulated in response to Marxism rather than deconstructionism, cf. Lourens M. du Plessis, "Function and Role of the State," in John C. Vander Stelt, ed., *The Challenge of Marxist and Neo-Marxist Ideologies for Christian Scholarship* (Sioux Center, Ia.: Dordt College Press, 1982), 149-186. Cf. also contributions by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (on the family), Peter Paris and H. Russel Botman (on culture and race) in Lugo, ed., *Religion, Pluralism and Public Life*.
33. Jacques Derrida shocked many of his deconstructionist and postmodern sympathizers when he claimed that justice could not itself be deconstructed; i.e., in spite of the oppressive implications of many actual claims about justice, there is a summons to justice confronting us which we cannot finally get behind in order to disclose a more ultimate structure of oppression. This example of the "ethical turn" in postmodernism was an important clarification of his position. Cf. "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundations of Authority'," in Drucilla Cornwell et al, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-67. A key quotation is this: "Justice in itself, if it exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible.... Deconstruction is justice" (14-15). He still maintains, however, that the content of justice will always remain beyond our conceptual grasp (24-25).
34. I suspect that this position is something like a commitment to a radicalized version of typically modern Enlightenment notions of individual autonomy and social equality. If so, the force of the deconstructionist claim to have escaped from the meta-narrative of modernity is blunted. Derrida himself claims, "Nothing seems to me to be less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal" (*Ibid.*, 28).
35. Cf. Julia Stronks, "Christians, Public Policy and Same-Sex Marriage: Framing the Questions Before We Shout Out the Answers," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26, no. 4 (1997): 540-562.
36. Cf. Bob Goudzwaard, *Globalization and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), including the responses.