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## Pluralism in the plural

(Editor: This is the fourth in a dialogue series of *(Editor: This is the third in a dialogue series of contributions on the nature of pluralism in American politics.)*)

Last week in this space Ashley Woodiwiss charged that pluralism “as a way of thinking about political reality . . . is just too nice” in that it apparently assumes social harmony to be the normal state of affairs while conflict is merely a temporary ripple in this otherwise placid state. As an alternative approach, he offered the perspective of Christian *agonism*, which recognizes that conflict is always present in any society and assigns to politics the task of managing conflict so as to limit its effects in the society as a whole. Woodiwiss argues that Christian agonism, based in an Augustinian realism, is rooted in a more biblical understanding of humanity’s fallen nature.

Woodiwiss’ critique may be justified in some cases, but certainly not all. A richer understanding emerges when we recognize that pluralism exists at multiple levels, as Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen point out, each of which is based on a different understanding of diversity.

First, pluralism results from *spiritual or directional diversity*, the reality that different communities of people believe different things about the most important issues in life. When we hear it said that America is a pluralistic society, this is what is often meant. America is home to Christians, Jews, Muslims, agnostics and so forth. All must get along within the context of a common constitutional and legal framework, which is no simple matter given the divergent basic presuppositions held by these spiritual communities.

Second, pluralism emerges from what Mouw and Griffioen label *contextual or cultural diversity*. This, too, is a common understanding of pluralism in America. Irish-Americans are different from Greek-Americans. New Englanders are different from Southerners, boasting different cuisines, social mores and, in some cases, linguistic accents. People living

in different places tend to develop their own distinct ways of doing things. There is nothing amiss in this; it is part and parcel of our status as limited human beings created in God’s image.

A third form of pluralism might be labeled *societal pluriformity*. In a mature, differentiated society, human cultural activities are quite properly dispersed into a number of communal settings, each of which is governed by norms appropriate to that setting. The school is different from the business enterprise. The family is something other than a labor union. Following Rousseau and Marx, the totalitarian regimes of the last century sought to deny this pluriformity by subordinating it to a one-party-dominated government, to which citizens were deemed to owe single-minded allegiance. Such regimes were practically compelled by their own ideological commitments to persecute Christians, who confess that ultimate loyalty is owed to God alone.

Whichever form of diversity we envision, all three assume a multiplicity of interests that could come into conflict. When they do, something is needed to weigh authoritatively their respective claims and to effect a just resolution. This “something” is the state, the political community led by its government, uniquely charged by God with the responsibility of doing *public* justice. Even where these interests do not necessarily conflict—societal pluriformity in particular need not lead to discord—the state must coordinate their respective activities for the public good. In either case, organizations such as the Center for Public Justice are needed to help flesh out the norms by which the state properly conciliates the various forms of diversity found in America and elsewhere. Doing even limited good with resources at hand, the goal set forth by Christian agonists such as Woodiwiss, is not possible unless we first acknowledge such norms and undertake to live by them politically.

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