

September 10, 2010

## The Problem With Pluralism

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

The current moment of Tea Party “anger” in American politics reveals a political reality that many pluralist thinkers simply don’t grasp. The problem with pluralism *as a way of thinking about political reality* is that it is just too nice. For pluralists (secular or Christian), the differences that mark the Earthly City are inconveniences to temporal harmony, interests for whom some room should be made. Coming out of a liberal philosophical tradition (and those theological traditions at once dependent upon and encouraging this form of liberalism), *pluralism* is a modern concept which assumes that politics is a rational practice and can ultimately harmonize unruly wills. It may not be easy or swift in coming, but ultimately, for pluralists, we can all get along.

But there is no political *problem* of difference, to which pluralism provides the solution. Rather, difference is a political *fact*. And the real, troubling differences of our age are sustained both by passion and by will. Difference can only be negotiated and navigated, not solved. Pluralism fails to understand politics, and thus misdirects our efforts to engage it.

Over and against *pluralism* stands *agonism* with its classical acceptance that politics in the Earthly City is always a contested practice, its violence (rhetorical or otherwise) sometimes latent, but always present, and *permanently ineliminable*. Secular agonists accept the ancient insight of Homer and Thucydides that the city of human existence is always a thing of fragile beauty, a desperate project of security with its own self-destructive impulses barely kept at bay. They reject the utopianism of philosophers like Plato, who claimed that if we just got our thinking right (which requires that philosophers rule!) the “apparent” reality of conflict would be overcome by the “real” harmony that resides in the heart of Being.

*Agonism* holds that political harmony is an accidental, temporary condition. Once those conditions are eliminated, when, for example, economic downturns or the threat of terror put pressure on the Earthly City, then the destructive passions and wills hitherto kept at bay reemerge, engulfing the City. Agonists recognize that a political community is always defined by the *welthey* opposition.

*Christian agonism* takes its inspiration from Holy Scripture and St. Augustine, understanding the work of sin as throwing Being into a disordered and disordering state. Yes, the image of God endures, and, yes, the bearer of that image is capable of reason and great good. But she is also capable of the exact opposite. *Then* we will see face-to-face. But *now* we see through a glass darkened, not by the lack of theoretical clarity, but by the law of sin and death. Christian agonists affirm Augustine, who declares the Earthly City as dominated (and denominated) by the *libido dominandi*, the lust for domination.

Christian agonism appears to lead either to political quietism (touch not the unclean thing!) or to culture warring (onward Christian soldiers!). But these responses to agonism misunderstand that for Christians the stuff of politics is simply the doing of some limited good using the means at hand. As Christians we are called to neither flee the Earthly City nor subdue it. Rather, as a form of loving our neighbor, we are called to do what good we can with the best political judgment we possess. “Principled” agonists adjust their political expectations to the real conditions of the Earthly City. Rather than dreams of justice, Christian agonists reach for cups of cool water.

—Ashley Woodiwiss is the Grady Patterson Chair of Politics and directs the Drummond Center for Statesmanship at Erskine College in Due West, South Carolina.