

Review Article¹

Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference, by Kristen Deede Johnson. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xii + 276 pp. hb. £50 ISBN 13: 978-0-521-87003-0

Reviewed by Paul A. Brink, Christopher D. Miller and Jonathan Chaplin, with a response by Kristen Deede Johnson.

RESPONSE TO CHAPTERS 1 AND 2 BY PAUL BRINK

To think seriously about conversation today is no easy task. The call to conversation, to move beyond “mere” toleration, to stand alongside, to acknowledge difference but remain in dialogue—one does not need to travel far in the literature to find these and other similar exhortations. Indeed, the frequency of these appeals suggests the existence of some unknown factor at work: some natural corrective for the individualist excesses of Rawlsian liberalism? Perhaps an indication that our democratic deliberation is finally in recovery? We can always hope.

Few of these appeals, however, contain the depth and moral seriousness found in Kristen Deede Johnson’s new book.² Johnson seeks conversation in the public space, but she also is eager to converse about the grounds for that conversation, building upon an Augustinian vision that respects plurality even while affirming the One. Johnson deepens the conversation even as she enlarges it, bringing together ideas, theorists, even entire bodies of literature in novel ways. The result is a wonderfully productive and stimulating project.

In her opening chapters, Johnson’s primary concern is simply to lay out and explore several of the most important liberal understandings of the value of tolerance, liberalism being the ideological medium through which most of us have our first encounter with that complicated value. Her first chapter makes clear the complexities that concern even toleration’s definition. Further controversies over its justification, as well as its difficulties addressing the realities of pluralism and difference today have led some to move beyond a political theory of tolerance “in the name of difference.” That is the focus of her

¹ The material in this review article was first presented at an “Author Meets Critics” panel at the Paul Henry Institute Symposium on Religion and Politics, Calvin College, 24-26 April 2008. The three reviewers addressed, on their own terms, three successive sections of the book, and have not attempted to develop a shared critical viewpoint.

² Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Page references in the text are to this work.

third chapter. Between these two, Johnson focuses on the work of two influential liberal thinkers: the true-believer early John Rawls (29-35), the pushed-as-far-as-he-can-go late Rawls (40-52), and the doing-Rawls-one-better Richard Rorty (67-77). Johnson not only provides thorough summaries of each of these but also reviews many of the most significant criticisms brought against them: Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Jürgen Habermas, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, among many others, are all reviewed in turn. The entire chapter traces an ideology in retreat: liberalism is forced back ever further from its strong Enlightenment roots, as it becomes clear how such a comprehensive doctrine cannot perform the task of providing the public philosophy and moral vision for even a reasonably plural society. The result, as seen in Rorty in particular, is an illiberal liberalism and apolitical politics that excludes, that stifles, that silences. Liberalism, having run out of ideas, returns to its source, and rediscovers Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

Liberalism and Tolerance

The focus of my comments here is confined to these earlier chapters, and in particular, to Johnson's account of tolerance: "its origins, its conceptuality, its merits, and its entailments" (6). There are few political concepts as paradoxical: how can it be good to tolerate that with which one disagrees? The basic problem, as stated by Bernard Williams, is this: we require the virtue "only for the intolerable" (7). If only we had been asked to tolerate the merely tolerable!

As with other virtues we might name, liberalism claims to be the ideology of tolerance, *par excellence*. The historical narrative is familiar: faced with a situation in which, on the one hand, it seemed most unlikely that any of the Christian faiths would become common to all in early modern Europe, and, on the other, religious positions that admitted no compromise, early liberals sought to establish political order on something other than a religious foundation. The story continues that as liberalism developed these foundations, it also willed to us a second great gift: liberal toleration. The narrative is as old as the sixteenth century and as contemporary as John Rawls, and Johnson spends little time challenging the received wisdom. Yet there are dangers in accepting it too uncritically. In particular, we risk giving away too much, even that which we may need as we develop our contemporary accounts of how to navigate a plural politics.

First, there is reason to question whether liberal "tolerance" avoids a descent into scepticism and indifference, rather than maintaining the higher ground of disapproval. The language here is tricky. What Johnson makes clear in her review is that toleration, by definition, involves *disapproval*, so that the object of toleration is viewed as wrong or objectionable, and those who offer toleration make a decision to not interfere or repress (7). Toleration thus is not the same as indifference or scepticism. Toleration is not needed for those one views with indifference.

For this reason, the liberal strategy for dealing with religious difference, both in the seventeenth century and today, does not qualify as toleration. In their

concern to establish the foundations for political order on something *other* than religion (reason, natural right, social contract, overlapping consensus), liberalism relegates religion to the realm of public indifference. (And note that our concern here is not that of the agonist: religion would be publicly present if liberalism even disapproved; it turns invisible when liberalism doesn't even care.)

But there are also reasons to question the historical accuracy of this account. While it may be that liberalism's legacy is not a tolerationist ethic, toleration may occasionally be found in a perhaps unexpected source: the religiously orthodox themselves. I depend here partly on the work of Perez Zagorin, who is able to discover in his retelling of the narrative distinctly religious voices counselling political toleration well in advance of the better-known Enlightenment figures.³ Crucially, in Zagorin's counter-narrative, the arguments for toleration are rooted firmly in religious belief, demonstrating a notion of religious freedom not dependent on scepticism or indifference, but rather a concern for the spiritual welfare of the faith—and the faithful—itsself.

Recovering this account of the rise of toleration is vital. If we wish to articulate (resurrect?) a stronger account of plurality in public life, challenging the view that sees religious tolerance as the liberal blessing-that-keeps-on-giving is critical. One reason is that it provides some of the "principled positive arguments" for toleration that Johnson finds missing in the standard liberal accounts. Another is that it also provides additional support for Johnson's review in her fifth chapter of the scholarship of Manent, Cavanaugh and others who question the degree to which liberalism arose as the solution to religious conflict (216-18). Others might also be noted: John Hallowell and Eric Voegelin, for example. What these dissenters make clear is the degree to which liberalism's origins are more controversial than the dominant narrative might suggest.

Liberalism and Consensus

But our hand should not be overplayed here. The "fear of civil strife" motive certainly features prominently in liberal arguments concerning the role of religion in public debate. Rawls never stopped offering such arguments—in *Political Liberalism* certainly, and also in his later "Public Reason Revisited" article and in his interview with *Commonweal* magazine.⁴ Such arguments also feature

³ Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. See my review essay, "Tolerant Orthodoxies" in *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 4.2 (Fall 2006), 57-58.

⁴ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, xxiv; John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64.3 (Summer 1997), 803; Bernard G. Prusak, "Politics, Religion and the Public Good: An interview with philosopher John Rawls," *Commonweal* 125.16 (September 25, 1998), 15.

prominently in Rorty's oft-cited "Conversation-Stopper" article,⁵ and even among members of the U.S. Supreme Court.⁶

But for many modern liberals, including Rawls, the "fear of civil strife" motive is only secondary. More often, Rawls and others appeal to civic duties and virtues (reciprocity, civility, mutual respect, civic friendship) that go beyond calculations in the name of peace toward stronger determinations of what citizens owe one another. This is to what Paul Weithman refers when he speaks of a "liberalism of reasoned respect:"⁷ a liberalism concerned with virtue, rather than with prudence—in Rawls's words, a liberalism "for the right reasons." This means that the vulnerabilities of liberalism regarding its historical narratives concerning both tolerance and the matter of its own origins, although important, are not decisive. Other arguments, including many reviewed in Johnson's second chapter, provide additional support.

An additional possibility may be found in a distinction made by Rawls that Johnson does not emphasize: a distinction between three types of political agreement that might occur among religious and secular comprehensive doctrines.⁸ The first of these is a mere *modus vivendi*, little more than an treaty among parties, accepted out of circumstance (and exhaustion). More substantive is the *constitutional consensus*, in which there is agreement upon some basic principles of justice, though the agreement does not extend to the reasons why these principles are supported. Finally, Rawls offers the more familiar *overlapping consensus*, in which the various comprehensive doctrines join in a consensus around a particular conception of justice.

Rawls never develops the notion of constitutional consensus very thoroughly; indeed, it is one of the few undertheorized elements of a generally overtheorized theory of justice. An easy guess is that his dissatisfaction has to do with the move from the "fear of civil strife" motive to a liberalism "for the right reasons," as noted above. If our concern is only to avoid religious warfare, it may be sufficient for us to remain at the weaker agreements. But as Rawls is concerned that our agreement have a substantive *moral* content, it is only by restricting our discourse to what the overlapping consensus can support that we are able to talk to each other. The constitutional consensus, in contrast, contains

⁵ Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," *Common Knowledge* 3.1 (1994), 1-6.

⁶ See Justice Stevens's dissenting opinion (joined by Justices Souter and Breyer) in the 2002 Cleveland school voucher case: "I have been influenced by my understanding of the impact of religious strife on the decisions of our forbears to migrate to this continent, and on the decisions of neighbors in the Balkans, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East to mistrust one another. Whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundation of our democracy" (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 536 U.S. 639, at 686 (2002).)

⁷ Paul J. Weithman, "Introduction: Religion and the Liberalism of Reasoned Respect." *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul J. Weithman. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, 5, 33.

⁸ *Political Liberalism*, 158-168.

agreement on some principles of justice and on the constitutional framework that surrounds them, but no agreement on the reasons for supporting such principles. In fact, there are likely to be as many justifications for the consensus as there are parties to it.

If we consider this distinction in light of Johnson's call for a genuine conversation between "publics" that goes beyond mere dialogue (235), what is most appealing about the constitutional consensus is precisely what Rawls finds so problematic. If conversation is central to the task of politics, then the ground upon which we meet politically cannot be "fixed" once and for all: the meaning of the political itself is also plural and will change over time. For the liberal, this lack of "right reasons" represents an inordinate risk. The proposed liberal solution, however, is not merely undemocratic, but also anti-political: it seeks to establish through law what needs to be discovered in politics. For the pluralist however, including the Christian pluralist, the possibilities are liberating: they hold out the vision of a public space less concerned with the principles under which we are all supposed to operate, and more concerned with how you and I can meet, and together enter into conversation about *we*.

RESPONSE TO CHAPTERS 3 AND 4 BY CHRISTOPHER D. MILLER

Johnson has written a delightful book, impressive in its scope and command of the diverse sources with which it engages. She masterfully investigates the parallel development of pluralist thought in philosophy and political theory on one hand and what she terms the "Augustinian turn" on the other, insisting that the two trends have much to say to one another. She weaves together several key texts from these traditions beautifully and manages to maintain a careful, consistent and measured argument throughout. Johnson's book complements other fine recent books on religion and politics, such as Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*⁹ and Christopher Eberle's *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*.¹⁰ I hope it reaches the same level of influence as these and finds its proper place on university required reading lists.

Overview

Having found liberal notions of tolerance wanting and secular accounts of public space inadequate, Johnson turns her critical eye toward theorists who can be broadly categorized as "agonistic." They are loosely united by a common belief "that no political theory or society can fully include or incorporate all that there is to 'life' and 'identity,' that 'remainders' that exceed our ability to capture them will always exist" (83).¹¹ This leads them to be suspicious of liberal consensus,

⁹ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

¹⁰ Christopher J. Eberle, *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

¹¹ Johnson goes on to highlight that, according to agonistic political theory, "a certain amount of chaos and conflict is irreducible, and that power permeates every realm of

which they hold denies the irreducible contestability of social agonism, as well as strict distinctions between public and private domains, which they feel overlook the politically relevant aspects of many structures deemed “private” and arbitrarily exclude voices considered “unreasonable.”

After addressing a host of agonistic theorists (including Bonnie Honig and Chantal Mouffe) Johnson focuses her attention on a theorist with whom she clearly feels most affinity, William E. Connolly. Although Connolly’s work is primarily political, he delves into realms (deliberately) not explored by Rawls. Like Johnson, Connolly finds the locus of political life to be in more visceral, identity shaping communities, such as religion, and he therefore seeks to blur traditionally liberal lines between public and private space. One means by which Connolly blurs these lines (or practices what Kathleen Skerrett has called “critical askesis”¹²) is by focusing on identity formation and its relation to power—that is, how the multiple power structures in, say, religious traditions and politics, through systems of reward and punishment, shape and define one’s identity on both rational and visceral/affective levels. Again, Connolly’s ontological position holds that, because identities necessarily leave “remainders,” identities cannot be static, but are, instead, social and evolving and are often sustained through an antagonistic relation to others. He describes this relationship as the problem of “identity\difference,” to signify that “difference requires identity and identity requires difference” (102).

Identity, then, has an inherently ethical quality—as Connolly would have it, maintaining our own identity tempts us toward the regulation of others. He seeks to highlight the arbitrary nature of these relations and to warn against the move to enthrone one’s own self-image as the proper reflection of “the immutable, true order of reality.” Other identities conflicting with or departing from one’s own identity are, then, deemed “abnormalities,” which are to be “labeled” or “marginalized...because they are seen to be contradictory to the ‘true’ nature of what it is to be human” (103). Because no settled identity can adequately deal with the disparate strands within it, Connolly encourages all citizens to be aware of the contingency of their own identities and to be open to the challenges others might bring to them. Therefore, Connolly encourages citizens to be willing to “move and be moved below the level of explicit belief as well as in the medium of belief” and “to keep a window ajar to the possibility of conversion to something new.”¹³ Johnson finds much to applaud in Connolly’s work, but she recoils at his more Nietzschean moments. Connolly, for instance, rejects theism

political society and every articulation of political theory...[A]t every point a particular configuration of identities or institutions within society based on contingent arrangements of power could be unnecessarily excluding and doing violence to ‘difference’” (83-4).

¹² Kathleen Skerrett, “The Indispensable Rival: William Connolly’s Engagement with Augustine of Hippo.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72.2 (June 2004), 487-506.

¹³ William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, xxii.

and resists granting any particular moral schema the status of the true universal moral order. Both, however, are deeply interested in the power and ubiquity of religion. Johnson's book is praiseworthy alone for providing such a clear and helpful introduction to Connolly's important work to students of religion and theology.

Connolly and Augustinianism: An Engagement?

Although Johnson demonstrates that she can deftly navigate the complex and variable waters of agonistic theory, we get little insight into how this tradition might affect her own conception of the Christian tradition. As it stands, Johnson offers an excellent summary and critique of Connolly's criticisms of the univocity and inadequacies of political secularism on one hand and a thorough and enlightening exposition of Augustine on the other, but we get little to no engagement between the two fields of investigation: we don't know, for instance, how Connolly's work might apply to Johnson's own participation in the Christian tradition or how her own Christian identity might be formed and sustained by resources outside Christianity.

Instead, she proposes a reinvigoration of Augustine's Heavenly City/ Earthly City dualism. Such a perspective would provide room, she thinks, for pluralism and contingency in the earthly realm while offering hope and a basis for unity in the eschatological age to come. Augustine, then, provides a way to embrace the concerns of post-Nietzscheans like Connolly and yet avoid their ultimately nihilistic celebration of difference. However, an Augustinian perspective does not celebrate difference for its own sake, nor is it optimistic about the potential for true justice and peace in the earthly realm. Unlike Connolly, Johnson does not see the contingency of the political as an opportunity for unmitigated self-creation, but her Augustinian pessimism about the prospects of political rule, coupled with the belief that the Kingdom of Heaven is "primarily eschatological," quells any desire for Christian political domination. Rather than the state, Johnson's polis is the church, which exists as a "resident alien" on earth.

In what follows, I wish to make two Connollian points regarding Johnson's Augustinian view of the church and society. The first will express Connollian doubts about the prospects of unity within the church, which I argue complicate appeals to "firstfruits" and "glimpses" of the Heavenly City. The second will seek to challenge Johnson's picture of the kingdom of God as it relates to non-Christian traditions, opening her Augustinian church to glimpses of the kingdom found outside her confessional community. I conclude that if this critique is valid, it should reduce the sense that the church is alien (in the Hauerwasian/Augustinian sense), or that it is a "primary polis" (123-4), because Christians ought to seek and expect to find expressions of the kingdom of heaven everywhere, not only in the institutional church.

Complicating the Church

One place for Connolly to enter into Johnson's view of the church is in her brief discussion of the importance of language and interpretation within the Christian

tradition. Despite choosing “not to follow the semantic trail blazed by certain postmodern thinkers,” Johnson nevertheless claims that “one of the most fundamental tasks for the Church to consider is who defines its language” (197, 228). This admission makes reference to the fact that the formation and maintenance of the Christian tradition is itself political—it involves competing interests and exclusions and requires discipline and rewards to maintain its shape. Connolly would wholeheartedly agree, and it follows for him that static moral arrangements necessarily involve insidious expressions of narcissism, producing unjustifiable urges to draw arbitrary boundaries. For this reason, revision is key to maintaining truly moral relations. Johnson rightly acknowledges the importance of this concept in Connolly’s work (129),¹⁴ but she has reservations about absorbing this insight herself because it tends toward an aimless, “free-floating” ethics. There is truth in this statement, but it is also misleading. It is not that post-Nietzscheans like Connolly resist appeals to authority; they simply want to acknowledge that there are multiple authorities in play, and that these authorities are themselves filtered through human language and interpretation. In Johnson’s terms, there will always be a “who” defining the language of any community. Connolly would claim that all moral deliberation is, in this sense, “free-floating.”¹⁵

Behind Johnson’s concern over the issue of “free-floating” authority is her more fundamental complaint, following Stephen K. White,¹⁶ that Connolly’s own position lacks the comprehensiveness necessary to enable it to provide trustworthy moral guidance (132). Johnson is right to accent this problem, even if Connolly would readily admit to it,¹⁷ but pointing out the tension does not, by itself, alleviate the ethical predicament Connolly is trying to expose. Johnson is

¹⁴ Johnson writes that the “most crucial aspect of his ethos is that of self-revision.”

¹⁵ To illustrate this point, consider Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. Raleigh, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Noll argues that leading up to the Civil War pro-slavery theological arguments appeared stronger and were buttressed both by Christian tradition and the preponderance of biblical support, while arguments from northern abolitionist ministers were found largely unpersuasive. This presented the American church with a genuine “theological crisis” as Noll puts it. But, in context, how was one to tell which side spoke more accurately for the Kingdom of Heaven? Appeal to which authorities would have helped resolve the issue for the antebellum inquirer? Contemporary controversies over the role of women in the church and the status of gay marriage further reveal how complicated appeal to authority remains.

¹⁶ Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

¹⁷ “Moral economies...are indispensable to life. But every moral economy also involves a certain forgetting, a forgetting of arbitrary impositions in the very pattern of equivalences it place under the star of morality.” Due to this propensity to forget “arbitrary impositions,” Connolly calls us “to subject morality to critical ethical scrutiny.” (*Augustinian Imperative*, 132) He realizes, therefore, that all ethical reflection must begin with some more substantive moral inheritance—his ethos is parasitic in this way. This admission does not, however, give ethical advantage to inherited, thicker notions of the good; they are necessary, but not sufficient.

highlighting what Connolly refers to as the “indispensability and fragility of ethics.”¹⁸ There are two horns to this dilemma, one to which Johnson calls attention: an ethical position, if not grounded in some structurally sound bedrock, is unable to be effectively discriminatory. However, she does not address the second horn, that ethical positions are themselves “fragile” and tend toward “dumb, arbitrary barriers,” many times motivated by deep-seated resentments (55-9). Pointing to the role of women in the church, the history of theological battle over slavery and the recent challenge of homosexuality brings this issue into relief. Connolly would point out that the Church has sometimes led people astray on these issues. Despite Johnson’s repeated acknowledgment that the present church is fallen, one is still left with the impression that the deep differences within the church complicate its resources more profoundly than she is willing to suggest.

The Alien Church and the Common World

Although Johnson’s description of the church contains shades of Hauerwasian pessimism about the possibility of achieving social/political justice, peace and unity with those outside the church,¹⁹ she goes further than Hauerwas and Milbank in advocating engagement with the political realm, and her position is greatly aided by her recommendation to widen our notion of “public” space. These are beautiful sections of the book in which she describes a hopeful vision that calls citizens to embrace thick conversation across confessional lines, humility in their own understanding and openness to having their minds changed.²⁰ For instance, consider Johnson’s claim that “belief in our ability to learn from each other in the midst of our differences lies at the heart of the picture of conversation we are here trying to present” (234). I want to push this description even further: What if we glean from this that “learning from each other” requires the expectation that we may glimpse the kingdom of heaven even outside the church? Would this not reduce the distance we feel between Christianity and various other traditions? Would it not have some effect on what we expect to achieve across religious differences or within the public realm?

Unfortunately, it seems that in other places she maintains the kind of uniquely quarantined position for the church reminiscent of the aforementioned theologians. As a result, she overemphasizes the threat of “narcissism” and “free-floating” ethical deliberation of alternative communities while not fully coming to

¹⁸ William Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 55.

¹⁹ I should note that Johnson expresses clear points of divergence with Hauerwas (226-7). Nevertheless, I think his influence on her general picture of the church is evident throughout the book.

²⁰ Connolly would, I think, heartily affirm Johnson’s wonderfully risky vision of conversation wherein “[e]ach party is open to being persuaded by the other, to changing its convictions and practices, in small and large ways, and even to being converted to different beliefs and manners of life.” (235)

terms with the deep-seated divisions within the church.²¹ For instance, consider the following: “earthly justice and peace are not comparable to heavenly justice and peace.” Johnson doubts that “the political realm could itself embody the justice and peace of Christ” (229-30). At this level of abstraction, when we are discussing the *idea* or *concept* of justice, peace and the like, it is easy to read into our society a chasm between not just Christian practice and heavenly calling, but between Christian and non-Christian moral goods. But, as Johnson herself notes, for these virtues to be intelligible, they must first be “embodied and practiced, as narratives are incarnated and lived out, as people live together and engage with one another”(235). Once these virtues take on flesh through practice, we can expect to find considerable areas of agreement. After all, as Johnson indicates, our identities are structured socially, and our social networks are not limited to our engagement with other Christians. We begin to develop a sense of moral goods at a very young age, in sometimes mundane circumstances: interacting with a Jewish childhood friend on the playground, with the Mormon goalie on an elementary school soccer team, in moments of honesty when a family member expresses her deep doubts about God and loses her grip on faith. Long before we begin to reflect philosophically and theologically on our differences with others, we’ve already developed, together, a complex of shared terms, experiences and commonalities. These, I want to suggest, have a fundamental and weighty significance—they inform our ethical judgments and condition, in Connolly’s terms, our “lower,” “visceral registers.”²² I think Johnson’s emphasis on the lived quality of spiritual/ ethical goods beckons in this direction, but her allegiance to the Hauerwasian/Augustinian picture of the church—a picture that insists on its general alienation—obscures the reality of our present ethical situation by overstating the distance between the moral goods of the heavenly city and those we share with our neighbors.²³

However, I take it that the main target of Johnson’s study is twofold: to dismantle the idea that religion ought to be dichotomous, carved up as public and

²¹ I should add that the divisions within the church do not end with social issues, but extend into the very root of theological understanding and textual appeal. Even if we exclude for the moment Mitt Romney’s recent claim that Mormonism is just a form of Christianity, we must still consider the extensive differences between the creedless Quakers, the Dyophysite Oriental Orthodox and pre-millennial Pentecostals across the United States and Latin America. The differences among these groups is over, among other things, the fundamental questions of the nature of Christ and his relation to the trinity, the role and authority of scripture, and the very existence of sacraments. Certainly we can only speak of doctrinal unity among these groups in the loosest sense of the term.

²² Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist*, 3.

²³ Augustine draws too severe a contrast between earthly and heavenly moral goods. If it is true that peace, justice and love in the earthly city “do not compare” to their counterparts in the heavenly city, then we have no business to think that anything like peace, justice and love exist as we know them in the heavenly city at all—we are left completely disoriented. Justice, love and peace may be imperfect in their earthly form, but to be intelligible at all as justice, love and peace, they must be, in some sense, comparable.

private, and to challenge nationalist Christian voices that seek state dominion. With the former, her interlocutor is the liberal or secularist who wishes to secure the purity of politics by ridding it of the superfluity of religion. On a sliding scale, she therefore falls much closer to Connolly than Rawls. She fears, likewise, a Christianity so thoroughly Americanized that it loses any profoundly Christian critique of politics-as-usual and fails to bring truly prophetic witness to the materialism, chauvinism and power mongering that are too often the mark of our society and politics. I am deeply aligned with this motivation. I am equally frightened, however, by the rift developing, particularly in American culture, which is flimsily labeled by talk radio shock jocks as “the culture wars.” I tend to agree with Jeffrey Stout that over-reliance on the picture of the alienated church offered by Hauerwas and Milbank only serves to exacerbate the supposed distance between virtuous citizens, no doubt against the intentions of these authors. Religious differences do and ought to persist, but are not, and arguably cannot be, as incommensurable and vast as they are sometimes painted to be.²⁴

Conclusion

Johnson’s book features several accomplishments. It introduces the work of William Connolly to those in theological and religious studies, it advances reflection on the role of the church in society beyond the picture offered by Milbank and Hauerwas and it presents a beautiful and risky model of civic conversation. My criticisms are but minor quibbles compared to the enormous areas with which I agree with Johnson and am inspired by her picture of Christ’s body as yearning for justice and fully engaged. Indeed, none of the aforementioned musings ought to detract from Johnson’s project. Quite to the contrary, they stand as testimony to the evocative themes she raises and investigates. If anything, my own points of dissent ought to be interpreted as continuing the conversation that Johnson has so graciously and skillfully begun—a form of, if you will, “agonistic respect.”

RESPONSE TO CHAPTERS 5 AND 6 BY JONATHAN CHAPLIN

In the final two chapters of the book the author deploys the Augustinian framework set out in chapter 4 to develop a positive “theology of public conversation.” This is a profoundly rich and appealing model of communication across plural social visions which, as Christopher Miller has explained, goes well beyond the requirements of merely rational political dialogue. The model aims to move beyond both a mere tolerance of difference which, in any case, turns out to

²⁴ In his *Religion, Interpretation and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997, Terry Godlove, drawing on Donald Davidson, argues that the fact that we disagree at all with our neighbors on issues of justice and peace requires an even more extensive network of agreement. He maintains that incommensurability only truly occurs on the more opaque and abstract levels of reflection.

harbor its own forms of exclusion, and an agonistic ontology of primordial conflict in which all possibility of harmony across difference is closed off from the start. Several new interlocutors are critically engaged in these chapters, including Milbank, Barth, Hauerwas, Cavanaugh, and O'Donovan, but I focus mainly on the author's own constructive argument for respecting pluralism.

Two kinds of difference

As chapter 4 makes clear, an Augustinian political theology powerfully affirms the possibility of a *final* harmony which yet embraces difference. It does so because it starts out from an *original* harmony of created order in which unity subsists through and not at the expense of created plurality. But such an Augustinian vision also insists that such unity-in-diversity is available only in the eschatological future of the Heavenly City, even though it may be partially enacted now in the life of the church. Utopian expectations regarding the achievement of harmony amid the differences characterizing our present earthly cities are therefore (quite properly) radically deflated. Yet the future vision of harmony-within-difference can still profoundly inform our present attempts to negotiate our current condition of pluralism. It turns out that two parallel arguments for respecting difference are advanced on the basis of this vision, and I want to distinguish them more sharply than the author does.

The first is that, since God himself affirms plurality by building difference right into the created order, so we should respect manifestations of difference in our own societies. The author claims, against agonism, that *only* by construing difference as a divinely created good (also redeemed in Christ) do we have sufficient reason to embrace it.

The second argument is that the earthly city may not impose confessional uniformity upon its citizens and so by implication must make space for confessional difference. Why is confessional uniformity beyond the remit of earthly government? The argument goes like this. The Heavenly City is not wholly separate from secular government, and it leaves its imprint upon the conduct of the earthly city, principally through the faithful witness of the church. But this impact is limited: secular government cannot be remodeled according to the values of the Heavenly City, so any aspiration toward a "Christian state" is ruled out in principle. Yet it can and should at least create public space for the practice of true religion.²⁵ In a move which, while plausible, goes beyond what Augustine himself explicitly stated, the author then ventures that since the church rightly benefits from the conditions of relative peace afforded by the earthly city, it then has good reason to support the creation of similar space for a wide variety of other particular religious and other identities (230-1).

²⁵ Christians who find themselves in public office should make use of such space by striving as far as possible to discharge their individual roles in a manner befitting those who belong to the Heavenly City, ruling with justice, humility and mercy (229-30), even though no large-scale institutional transformation can be expected.

In these two parallel arguments for respecting pluralism, it is evident that two distinct senses of “difference” are being appealed to, one arising from creation, another occasioned by the fall (the deficiencies of the Earthly City).

The author refers to these two forms of difference as “positive” and “negative” difference, respectively (183). But here I would have welcomed a fuller indication of which concrete forms of difference we encounter today actually fall into each category.²⁶ The book’s opening definition of “pluralism,” for example, does not resolve the point: the term, we are told, refers descriptively to “the co-existence of distinct faiths, cultures, ethnicities, races, and ideologies within a society” (1). Now, on the one hand, a radical diversity of faiths and ideologies is surely essentially a consequence of the fall, whereas, on the other, distinct ethnicities and races may be attributed to the diversity of creation (and which side of the line “culture” falls on depends on how that term is defined). We could add that not all forms of differentiated social identity currently clamoring for public recognition fall in the same category. Gender is surely at least partly rooted in created (biological) difference, whereas homosexual orientation (at least on a traditional reading of Scripture), or disability, are not.²⁷ Greater clarity about the distinction would help caution us against speaking in unqualified terms of the need to respect, affirm, converse with, or embrace “difference.”²⁸ It would also help us in making the hard choices between various kinds of difference that are sometimes unavoidable in public policy. The appropriate public response depends on the complex particulars of the case, about which generalized appeals to a norm such as affirming diversity cannot tell us very much.

²⁶ The threefold distinction between types of pluralism set out in Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen’s *Pluralisms and Horizons*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, still serves as a valuable starting point, though it invites further elaboration. I deploy it “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity: From ‘Liberal Pluralism’ to ‘Christian Pluralism,’” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 35 2 (2006), 143-175.

²⁷ I am not at all implying that any manifestation of difference that can be attributed to the effects of the fall should therefore be publicly disrespected or excluded from public space. On the one hand, we should surely oppose all racist behavior or xenophobic political movements, and to respond to these odious phenomena with what Connolly calls “presumptively generous sensibilities” (quoted at 108) would be to fail those vulnerable to racism and nationalism (as Connolly seems to recognize). On the other hand, movements representing fragile minorities such as the disabled, or homosexuals facing homophobic discrimination or violence, should be attended to with great urgency. We might also note that the further claim that true respect for homosexual difference implies legalizing same-sex marriage is far from obvious, in large part because such a move would be held by many to imply a profound public *disrespect* for the particularity of heterosexual marriage.

²⁸ The classificatory question is further complicated by the additional distinction introduced by the author between God’s original action in creation and his providential action in preservation of a fallen world. Political order, she holds (following Augustine) is an instance of the second, but it would not seem adequate to classify it straightforwardly as either “positive” or “negative” difference.

Being the church within pluralism

Another central concern in these chapters is to show how proposing an authentically *Christian* basis for respecting pluralism (a “Christian ontology of difference”) does not at all imply any project of imposed *Christianization* (184; 175). Thus, as Johnson puts it, while Christianity certainly “influences how its citizens view and contribute to earthly justice and peace through its understanding of heavenly justice and peace,” it does so in the mode of a “service that is not marred by lust for glory and power” (184). That is well said. But what precisely might this mean for the conduct of the church in a pluralistic contemporary polity? The author answers this question in two stages. The first sets out a broad theology of the complementary roles of church and political order, the second fills in the specific content of a “theology of public conversation.”

The basic orientation adopted is Augustine’s conception of the political order as a remedial, post-lapsarian institution with a limited mandate but one which, no less than the church, is governed by divine providence (198-206).²⁹ The model that emerges acknowledges the distinctness of the two institutional orders – each with its own calling and jurisdiction – while conceiving both as standing firmly under the Lordship of Christ (215).³⁰ The church does not seek to take over the polity, but equally it must resist any attempts by the political order to subordinate it to political imperatives. Today, it faces the special challenge of resisting the hegemonic ambitions of modern liberal states, which from their early modern beginnings have sought to subordinate the church by imposing upon society a restrictive conception of “the public realm” in which faith was excluded (220ff.). The church must therefore reassert its inherently “public” character, but to do so it must not simply stake a claim to inclusion in a public realm as defined by liberalism, but press for a radically different conception of “publicness.” This is an extremely important claim.

As this point is developed, three distinct claims are advanced. First, *the church is itself a “public”* (or a *polis*), where a “public” is defined formally as any community with common ends. The witness of the church is addressed to the public and it embodies that witness in its distinctive practices which are themselves pursued in public view, where necessary with a critical prophetic edge. Second, *only* the church is on this definition truly “public” since outside of

²⁹ This is then reinforced through an appeal to Barth’s radically Christological political theology which affirms the distinct mandate of the political order while also warning against the temptations of political idolatry (208-13).

³⁰ “[F]rom a theological perspective, [the political realm and the Church] are neither independent from each other nor equivalent to each other. Because Jesus Christ is Lord of both, they can exist at the same time, connected, under God’s providence, with different but not entirely incompatible ends. The political is supposed to play a role within a fallen, disordered world, and some of its goods are shared by those in the Church, and some in the Church are called to contribute to the pursuit of these goods. Nevertheless, the political realm is not capable of being neutral, and it is not supposed to have or capable of having the same ends as the Heavenly City, so inevitably times will arise when the political and the Church are in conflict” (215).

true worship no community can really share common ends; that is, it is the church itself which creates the possibility of genuine publicness. What secular societies can offer is no more than a pale shadow of a true common good. And what *liberal* secular societies today are able to offer is at best an emaciated experience of publicness, as a result of their subordination of common ends to mere individual self-interest.

The claim that only the church is “truly public” is being increasingly voiced today by various Augustinian political theologians. It is an arresting and controversial claim, but if we accept it we then need to find another suitable term to name the *space between communities*, a space which (I submit) is *not itself a community*. This seems to be what is being intimated in the third claim, i.e., that the “public” is also a space in which multiple, overlapping “publics” co-exist, complement each other, and compete (224). But this third definition of “public” seems on its face to stand in tension with the second, and I think it is confusing to refer to both phenomena with the same word. However, the larger point at stake here is surely valid: if secular political orders cannot and may not strive to realize a single, unifying common good, then they must define and protect a societal space in which many particular conceptions of the good can be authentically articulated by diverse communities, with minimal restriction. In my view, this need not (and should not) be characterized as a morally empty or neutral space, even though it is not itself a morally cohesive “public” in the first sense of the term above.

What kind of conversation?

Such a societal arena is the forum within which what the author calls “rich and deep conversation” between such diverse communities can take place. The author defines “conversation” here not simply as “dialogue” but rather as a many-sided practice of “social intercourse,” mostly taking place beyond the formal political realm, and involving the mutual offering and critical reception of many distinctive forms of embodied particular identities: “In this type of conversation, each party speaks from within the particularity and fullness of its own identity and beliefs and operates with a trust in what can be learned and accomplished through interaction, debate, and deliberation” (235).³¹ What this enjoins concretely will differ in different contexts, but the author ventures that, “[p]erhaps the most that we can say in our current *milieu* is that whatever political theory is used...to justify common practices would, ideally, accommodate a deep conversation of communal religious practices” (256).

While respecting the author’s claims regarding the modest scope of her project in this book, I must admit that I find this an unnecessarily restrictive

³¹ The author proposes that what Christianity can contribute to such conversation is “an ethos of Gospel participation,” a theological complement to William Connolly’s “ethos of critical responsiveness” (259). “To the concept of a “radical and plural democracy” Christians offer a radical love for the other, a radical hospitality and generosity towards those who are different...” (246).

conclusion. “Christianity,” we are reminded, “does not translate directly into any one political theory,” and can “coincide with a variety of earthly political institutions” (256). There is, I think, a sense in which both these statements are true. But to imply that the most that a political theology can offer today is an argument to sustain conditions of pluralist conversation is surely to shortchange the tradition. Political theology will also want to bring the full weight of its own substantive normative political traditions into that conversation – traditions which have generated distinctive conceptions of justice, freedom, law, authority, representation, accountability, citizenship, and so forth.³² It will want to propose that these be *the topic of conversation*. It will want them to be “conversation-starters,” to invert Rorty’s jibe, and indeed then to respectfully shape public conversation in these directions, while always remaining receptive to new insights from other conversation partners.

Conclusion

The “theology of public conversation” developed in these chapters advances Christian reflection on contemporary political theories of pluralism in at least two very valuable ways. It succeeds in engaging generously with and learning from both liberal and postmodern accounts of difference while nowhere losing its critical biblical edge. And it stretches the discussion beyond the necessary but admittedly limited and sometimes overly abstract conceptual analyses of the place of religious belief within “public reason;” it grounds the honoring of difference in the concrete practice of Christian faithfulness. The book then invites us to explore two questions in further detail: precisely which forms of difference will be conducive to human flourishing and which will retard it; and, once we have reached more clarity on that, what should be the complementary responsibilities of government, church and many other institutions (and individuals) in the face of the many manifestations of both “positive” and “negative” difference” we encounter today.

RESPONSE BY KRISTEN DEEDE JOHNSON

I would like to begin by thanking Paul Brink, Christopher Miller, and Jonathan Chaplin for the careful reading they have done of my text; it is a great honor to have scholars whom one respects take an interest in one's own scholarship. I also want to acknowledge Dan Hardy, the editor of the series of which this book is a part. Dan passed away prematurely in November 2007 after a long, fruitful, and faithful career as a theologian in the United States and the United Kingdom. I will forever be indebted to him for taking a chance on this book, and I like to think that the engagement with my text that these responses represent honors him.

³² A thumbnail sketch of some of these principles is found in my “Speaking from Faith in Democracy,” *Evangelical Review of Society and Politics* 2.1 (2008), 16-31.

I begin with Paul Brink's response. Brink makes an interesting suggestion that perhaps liberalism is not as linked to tolerance as most accounts would have us think, in that liberalism's solution to the problem of religious diversity was to make religion a matter of public indifference rather than public disapproval. I understand the point, but it seems safe to say that tolerance was still a necessary part of the equation. To make the move to public indifference, which did not happen overnight and therefore required at least an initial level of public toleration, the idea of tolerance as a private virtue had to be introduced. For religion to no longer serve as the foundation of the political order so that differing interpretations of religion could coexist might have ultimately moved toleration out of the public realm, but it required all the more that tolerance be cultivated at the private level, to ensure that citizens would no longer sense the need to act against other citizens with whose religious convictions they disagreed.

As to the historical account of the rise of toleration, I mentioned this in one scant paragraph, although I was aware that I was not doing justice to the literature that has arisen in recent years on the non-liberal or non-Enlightenment sources of toleration.³³ While I do not doubt that tolerance can and does have other roots besides Enlightenment liberalism, I nevertheless maintain that the tolerance which has been inherited by contemporary Western political theory is that which has its roots in the Enlightenment and in Enlightenment-based forms of liberalism. Certainly attempts have been made, in our current post-Enlightenment context, to find other ways of grounding this notion of tolerance, and I do think it is important, as Brink points out, for this exploration to continue as we search for alternatives to the view of "religious tolerance as the liberal blessing-that-keeps-on-giving."

When it comes to the three types of consensus found, if in part underdeveloped, within Rawls' political theory, I very much appreciated the direction in which Brink was moving in raising the question of whether the notion of *constitutional consensus* might be more helpful than Rawls' account allows. I did not explore this area of Rawls' thought, but I sense a degree of resonance between my argument and the idea that we find some agreement on principles of justice and the constitutional framework that underlies and supports those principles, but different reasons from the different parties within a political society for supporting those principles and that framework. I appreciate the desire for shared moral consensus that prompts Rawls to reject this consensus as too

³³ See, for example, Michael Walzer, *On Toleration*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997; Cary J. Nederman, *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration, C. 1100—C. 1550*. University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000; John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman, eds., *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998; and Cary J. Nederman and John Christian Laursen, eds., *Difference and Dissent: Theories of Toleration in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996.

thin, but if we want space for different members of our pluralist society to be able to support and participate in our political society while remaining faithful to their own, sometimes more primary allegiances, then we need to be open to something like a constitutional consensus. I also agree with Brink that when it comes to the need for an overlapping consensus, or the need to base our political discourse upon that with which we can all agree, Rawls is trying to avoid the hard but necessary stuff of politics itself. We need to be able to bring our differing convictions with us as we enter into political conversation. This is difficult and wearying and frustrating, as Brink acknowledges, but it seems to me to lie at the heart of politics.

Moving on to Christopher Miller's incisive analysis of my third chapter, I appreciate the depth of understanding of Connolly's thought that Miller brings. He notes that he would have liked to see more interaction between my engagement with Connolly and my later, more developed theological explorations. I admit that this engagement is not explicit in the early chapters. This is in part because I liked the implicit parallel between my own project and recent developments within political theory. Just as political theory has moved from supposedly neutral theories of justice upon which we can all agree to a recognition that competing comprehensive doctrines are operative in citizens and will prevent such consensus, and from mere recognition of those comprehensive doctrines to very explicit engagement with the ontological presuppositions that underlie a given political theory, so my own project moves from the less to the more theological. In addition, in articulating Augustine's perspective and my own more constructive proposal, I kept Connolly's criticisms in mind, so that they were incorporated into my thinking even if not explicitly addressed. So where Miller notes that Connolly's project encourages perspectives from other narratives to take root and change our perspective and behaviors, and while he suggests that I do not demonstrate what this might look like, I would counter that, by allowing Connolly's perspective to change my perspective, I incorporated what Connolly is encouraging into my subsequent chapters so that this was, in fact, implicitly demonstrated. This is not to say that I do not have strong disagreements with Connolly's thought, but those areas in which I learned from Connolly despite these disagreements – such as the need for humility and the willingness to be shaped and changed by those with whom we interact – I did my best to incorporate into my argument.

As Miller discusses the issue of multiple authorities in relation to the church, I was interested in the degree to which he draws upon language of "morality," since my understanding is that Connolly himself rejects the concept of morality altogether, considering it too closely tied to the unproblematic acceptance of an intrinsic moral order, whereas the language of "ethics" or "ethos" is not dependent upon such an order (112-113). That being said, Miller makes important points in this section. I would not want to deny that the use of power, language, and interpretation by differing "authorities" is of real significance within the historic and current church. Part of why I was drawn to the work of Reinhard Hütter as I wrote this book is that he was attempting to articulate an ecclesiology

and an understanding of authority that could hold for Protestants. Since he has subsequently converted to Catholicism we may be right to conclude with him that, as Miller seems to be suggesting, Protestants are left with nothing much beyond the problem of multiple authorities and disparate interpretations within and outside of the church. This is an area where I am not fully on board with Connolly, as I think that part of the reason we Protestants have so many different interpretations and undeveloped notions of the authorities that inform us as Christians is because we have allowed Christianity to be reduced to a set of private beliefs and values. This to me is what we need to reclaim – a public notion of the church which even in this age lays claim to our identities and our allegiances, shapes and defines our language, and gives us glimpses of what God intends by redemption, atonement, and Lordship. These are not inherently contestable, even if this side of the eschaton we cannot find full agreement about what they mean.

This line of thinking is similar to the reason that I emphasize the importance of being shaped by the narratives and practices of the church first and foremost, even as we enter into conversation with those who are shaped by different stories and practices. As Miller notes, we are shaped from a very young age by our involvement with a variety of people and contexts. This is a reality in a pluralistic society. Combine this with the influence of larger cultural currents, the media, *and* the privatized notion of Christianity bequeathed to us by liberalism, and the result is a large number of Christians who know very little about their convictions and practices, and a church that does little to embody its own narratives. The reason that Hauerwas and others are so inclined to emphasize the alien nature of the church is because that notion has been almost entirely eclipsed within the day-to-day reality of western Christianity. Reclaiming it may provide us with the resources, from within our own tradition, to engage those from other traditions with humility, love, and justice. This is not to exacerbate our differences but to enable rich engagement, rooted within particularity, that fosters humble interaction across those differences.

Jonathan Chaplin's clarifying comments seemed to help me understand my own argument better. I can certainly understand why he would write that he "would have welcomed a fuller indication of which concrete forms of difference we encounter today, actually fall into each category," meaning "positive" and "negative" difference. I have been waiting for someone to raise this point. A "positive" take on why I was not more specific is that I was trying to be humble, but if I am honest I was also trying to avoid controversy, particularly because I did not feel equipped to articulate all that would be involved in making my argument here more detailed. As I draw on Augustine it is relatively clear that the differences I focus on as "positive" have to do with culture, race, ethnicity, language, style, and custom. I would agree with Chaplin that differences linked to faiths, ideologies, and sexuality are more a result of the fall of creation than of God's original intentions, although, as he is careful to point out, this does not lead to the conclusion that these differences should be not be respected or included in the political realm. It is precisely because the identification of "negative"

difference does not automatically lead to a clear understanding of our political engagement with such difference that I was not more detailed in this area. The level of care and nuance needed to address this area well went beyond what I was able to offer within my book, but I do hope that others are more equipped to address this area than I am, for the important reasons that Chaplin identifies.

As to my perhaps unnecessarily restrictive conclusion, perhaps it would help if I gave a little narrative history on this point. When I started this project I thought that I might be able to put forward a political theory grounded in Christian thought that could move us beyond some of the limitations of political liberalism and agonistic political thought. Obviously this was somewhat ambitious, but more than that my convictions changed as I researched and wrote. I no longer sensed that Christianity lent itself to the creation or articulation of a particular political arrangement. Augustine believed that Christianity was compatible with a wide variety of political systems, and that a primary concern of Christians is in what ways a given particular arrangement limits their ability to worship the triune God. This is the approach I followed: I do not suggest an alternate political theory, rooted in Christian thought, to the ones currently guiding our political life, but I do probe and critique our current arrangements in light of how well they allow Christians to worship the God they know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is compatible with Chaplin's suggestion that I not lose sight of the "substantive normative political traditions" that have arisen out of Christian political theology and that we look to some of the concepts that arise from those traditions as conversation-starters in this age. "Conversation-starters" I am comfortable with. I do want to respect and be humble before the rich Christian tradition of political theology, but I am not yet convinced that I want to follow those aspects of that tradition that have found within the narratives of Scripture a prescription for specific, God-ordained political arrangements.

In closing, I want to sincerely thank each of the contributors for engaging with my work with exceptional generosity, charity, and clarity. I hope that through exchanges such as this one we can together come closer to grasping God's vision for diversity and the Church within our contemporary pluralistic society.

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