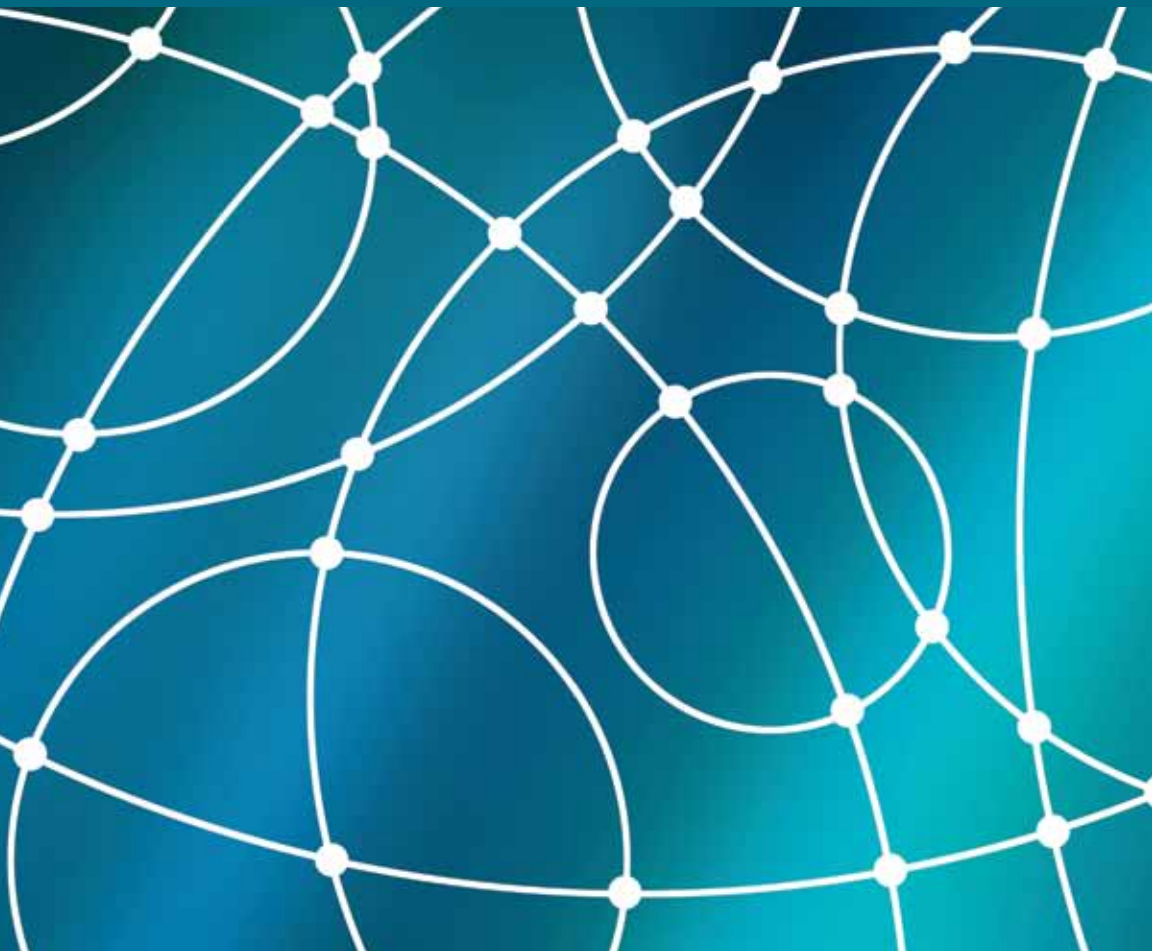


# Christianity and Social Work

*Readings on the Integration of  
Christian Faith and  
Social Work Practice*

FOURTH EDITION

T. Laine Scales and Michael S. Kelly  
Editors



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### **SOCIAL WELFARE IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY: LOVING THE NEIGHBOR YOU DON'T KNOW**

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*James R. Vanderwoerd*

Christians the world over are familiar with the second greatest commandment given by Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Jesus’ illustration of the implications of this commandment with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-36) makes it clear that a neighbor is understood as any person one comes into contact with who is in need. While that may have been clear for first century Jews living in Jesus’ time, it is less clear how this commandment can be fulfilled in 21<sup>st</sup> century societies. How are we to love our neighbors when we do not actually come into face-to-face contact with them? In large, urban, densely-populated, transitory societies, we might be aware of the acute needs of groups of people, but we cannot possibly cross paths with them all. What, then, can it mean to love our neighbor as ourself? Are we to be content with simply showing love only to those with whom we are personally connected? Or, does Jesus’ command compel us to go beyond just the needy person before us and extend to the many that we do not and cannot personally know?

One answer to these questions has been to institutionalize and formalize the responsibility for the care and welfare of others via the establishment of the welfare state. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the idea of the welfare state has come under question in many industrialized societies (Gilbert, 2004), and there have been increasing critiques of the welfare state and whether its advancement can even be considered a success. This debate has important implications for the legitimacy, role, and authority of social work, since it is a profession that depends to a large extent on the welfare state for its existence.

Should Christian social workers defend the welfare state? Should trends such as devolution, faith-based initiatives, and for-profit services be interpreted as threats to be resisted, or do these trends portend an appropriate return to a limited government that makes room for the charitable impulse of voluntary, church-based helping? Foundational to these questions is the question of who is responsible, in a diverse, technologically advanced, multi-cultural society, for the welfare and well-being of those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Past answers no longer suffice—neither the 19<sup>th</sup> century version, in which individuals were responsible to exercise their charitable obligations to their needy neighbors, nor the 20<sup>th</sup> century version, in which the state was responsible.



This chapter identifies several key biblical principles that provide a foundation from which to understand a Christian vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century social welfare. First, a brief discussion of the nature of societies will be described, followed by some implications and principles for how individual Christians, particularly social workers, understand their role in such societies. Next follows a discussion of the mutual rights and responsibilities that flow from this view and its understanding of the nature of humans as God's image-bearers. Finally, the paper explores the implications of this vision for three social welfare policy issues: the role of faith-related social service organizations; the rights of persons who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgendered (GLBT) to adopt or foster children; and the social welfare roles and responsibilities of business corporations.

### **Complex Societies**

The Salvation Army, Rosie O'Donnell, and BP (British Petroleum) — mention any of these names in casual conversation and one quickly gets a sense of the complexity of 21<sup>st</sup> century North American society and the widely disparate perspectives that exist among different people. How are we to understand such variation and complexity? Nostalgic hearkening to the “good old days” often portrays a mythical simple society in which it was assumed that everyone agreed about what was right and wrong. But today, people hold different beliefs about different things at different levels. Society is complex, if not downright confusing.

One way Christians have made sense of this confusion and complexity has been to start with an understanding of creation informed by the biblical story. For example, Wolters (1995), working from within the neo-Calvinist tradition, describes in his book *Creation Regained* how God created *all* of existing reality – including different societies – and continues to uphold it all. This biblical understanding of society posits that social structures were not created exclusively by humans, but rather were established by God as part of the created order. However, humans do have a unique role in developing, establishing, and refining these structures in response to God's created order, and can thus choose to do this in obedience or in rejection of God. Further, according to Wolters, these structures have characteristics and properties, similar to the laws that govern physical reality, which God built into them and that establish parameters for their functioning (Wolters, 1985; 1995).

The overall purpose of social structures is to facilitate God's intent for humans in His creation, which is the abundant flourishing of human relationships in harmony—what the Hebrews in the Old Testament called *shalom* (Gornick, 2002). One of our tasks as humans is to seek understanding and knowledge about the characteristics and properties of various social structures so that we might discern God's intent and purpose for them—and for us (MacLarkey, 1991).

To be sure, however, this is tricky business, in part because the Bible is not a social science reference book that provides simple formulas for universal application. God has given humans considerable latitude in developing social structures that are appropriate to specific times and places. It would be too simplistic to

suggest that the Bible provides blueprints for particular social arrangements that are universal across the breadth of historical and cultural variation.

Nevertheless, humans are called to develop and utilize social arrangements in a way that is consistent with God's commands and in a way which either contributes to or detracts from shalom. That is, social reality, unlike physical reality, can stray from adherence to God's norms because social structures are established and realized through human effort, and humans, unlike rocks, water, and other inanimate matter, can be obedient or disobedient.

Further, creation is not static, but is continually changing, at least not through the work of humans, who are empowered by God to work in the world to develop it. Humans not only build physical things, but also develop social organizations, practices, and institutions. Societies evolve and change over time through human imagination and intervention; social forms and entities that exist today did not exist yesterday and may not tomorrow. Such variation is understood to be part of God's plan for his creation—albeit distorted and stunted by sin and human failing. Nevertheless, the evolution of societies from agrarian rural to industrial and post-industrial are not seen as diverging from God's will, but rather as the unfolding history of God's kingdom in which humans play a primary role (Kalsbeek, 1975; Koyzis, 2003).

Not all humans, however, acknowledge God, and some outright reject or disobey Him. What are Christians to do about such people? Few would advocate that they be forced to obey God or become Christians, even if this was possible (sadly, this has not stopped some Christians in the past from resorting to coercion, even violently so). We take it for granted that not all citizens in a given nation are Christians, and that even if they were, wide differences of opinion exist about how things ought to be. Further, we recognize that citizens have a right to believe what they want, and to express that belief freely. Indeed, this right is enshrined as the First Amendment in the Constitution of the United States and in Articles 2a and 2b of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and in Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The idea of pluralism is often used to recognize the religious diversity within societies. There are at least three types of pluralism. The first, variously labeled as *confessional pluralism* (Skillen, 1994) or *spiritual or directional diversity* (Mouw & Griffioen, 1993), addresses diversity based on spiritual beliefs, religion, or confessions. This type of pluralism recognizes that individuals and groups within society may legitimately hold varying beliefs and, within the rules of law, act on these beliefs. It is this type of pluralism that makes space for differences in spirituality and religion, and provides guidance for how persons from different religious and confessional (including belief systems that are not explicitly religious) belief systems treat one another.

We also readily acknowledge that the Salvation Army, Rosie O'Donnell and her lesbian partner's relationship with their children, and BP are three very different types of social entities among many more: we attend churches, play on soccer teams, volunteer at the public library, sit on school boards, serve Thanksgiving dinners at the downtown soup kitchen, visit art galleries and museums, enroll

our children (and their animals) in 4H clubs, hold memberships in the American Automobile Association, and send donations to Bread for the World. These and a virtually infinite number of other ways in which people can associate and interact are a second type of pluralism referred to as *structural pluralism* or *associational diversity*. Regardless of the specific labels, the underlying idea is a recognition that society consists of a wide variety of types of organizations, and that individuals are free to join and associate together according to their own voluntary choices.

The third type of plurality is labeled as *cultural* or *contextual*. This type of plurality refers to the differences associated with ethnicity, culture, and language. While these may overlap with confessional / directional pluralism, distinguishing between these is important in that it prevents us from making erroneous assumptions that conflate beliefs and culture, for example, that all Muslims are Arab, or that all Indians are Sikhs.

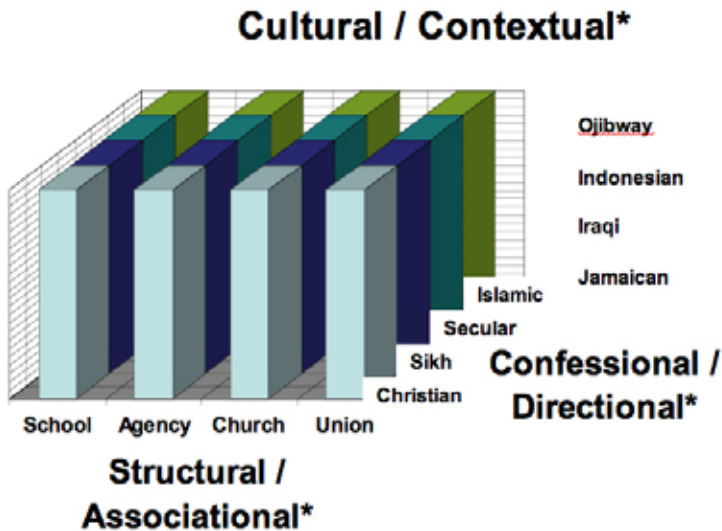


Figure 1. Three Types of Pluralities in Complex Societies

\*Note that for each of the three types of pluralities, the four specific labels are only examples, and are not intended to be exhaustive. For example, under structural / associational pluralism, there are many more types of societal structures that could be included such as businesses, professions, families, community theatre groups, self-help groups, bowling leagues, etc.

As shown in Figure 1, a person could belong to particular societal structures (for example a school or a labor union) that specifically operate from within a particular confessional or directional context. Such confessional contexts could be explicitly religious (such as a Christian university, or an Islamic school, or a Jewish social service agency) but could also not be specifically religious. For example, an agency serving women and children who are victims of male violence

could be explicitly situated within a secular feminist perspective; or, a labor union could be organized explicitly according to a Marxist-socialist perspective; or a child welfare agency could operate from an explicit anti-oppressive perspective.

Together, these three types of pluralisms capture the idea that people organize and live their lives in terms of their fundamental beliefs about the world (i.e., confessional / directional), in terms of the purpose or function of the grouping (i.e., structural / associational), and in terms of their belonging to various ethnic and cultural groups. Further, this understanding of multiple pluralities allows for the recognition of how fundamental beliefs operate in different social contexts. While we may disagree with other individuals and their choices, we recognize that in a diverse society, imposing our own particular perspectives on others is not a legitimate response when we encounter individuals who make choices different from our own, unless such choices violate established rules of law.

Sociologists use the term *institutions* to make sense of all the different ways in which people organize their lives within society. Institutions are the major building blocks of society and can be understood as the basic ways in which humans organize themselves to meet their needs. Commonly identified institutions include family, marriage, religion, law or justice, government and politics, education, and health.

The idea that society is more than simply individuals pursuing their own self-interests within a set of minimal government regulations (what Enlightenment liberals have called “the social contract”; see Nisbet, 1982) has led to much renewed interest in how individuals work together to offset the alienation and bureaucracy that arise in large institutions, along with the sense of helplessness that comes from simply acting on one’s own. *Civil society* and *mediating structures* are terms that are used increasingly to refer to the many ways in which people live, work, play, and relate to one another other than as individuals or as units within large institutions (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996; Wuthnow, 2004).

Of particular interest is how these numerous and different social entities relate to one another and how the overlapping, multiple, and sometimes contradictory claims of these entities can be sorted out. For example, who is responsible for teaching children about sexuality, parents or schools? What role should government have in sorting out such a question? Is government to be “above” parents and schools, telling them what they may or may not do? Or, are parents, schools (and other social entities) independent of government, and thus allowed to do as they wish?

Two prominent Christian theories address these questions: the Catholic concept of subsidiarity, and the neo-Calvinist concept of sphere sovereignty (Chaplin, 1995; Koyzis, 2003; McIlroy, 2003). According to both positions, God’s work of creation includes an ordering of the social relationships and organizations of society such as families, marriages, schools, business corporations, unions, sports teams, neighborhood associations, and consumer groups. Both subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty assert that these various social entities exist not simply at the behest of the state, but have a legitimacy and authority that ultimately comes from God.

Further, both positions claim that these entities possess autonomy appropriate to their social space and function. The concept of proximity is an important principle of subsidiarity. According to this idea, it is always preferable for decision-making and control to be held and exercised at the level that is closest (i.e., most proximate) to the situation. Local organizations and institutions, therefore, have the right to govern their own affairs. For example, churches do not need to get government approval over their doctrines, nor do parents need government to tell them what to feed their children. In other words, these various organizations have the right to make decisions without interference from government.

At the same time, however, Catholics and Calvinists both assert a role for government that is, in slightly different ways, overarching of these many other social organizations. Catholic social thought appeals to the idea of the common good and argues that government must provide the context and regulatory framework to ensure that other organizations contribute to, or at least do not directly detract from, the common good (Weigel, 1993). Thus, according to subsidiarity, the key criterion is not protecting the interests of particular organizations or entities, but rather, to ensure the best possible achievement of the common good. In other words, the common good as a principle is more important than the rights of organizations or individuals. Therefore, Catholic social thought always allows—indeed, demands—that higher and more distant entities, such as government, are entitled and have the responsibility to intervene when the common good is threatened by more local organizations.

Similarly, sphere sovereignty argues that each social organization has a specific and central role that is inherently attached to that organization as part of God's creation plan. The term *norm* refers to this role as the ideal standard to which organizations must aspire. Whether a specific organization identifies itself as Christian or not matters less than whether that organization conducts itself consistent with God's norms. The norm for government—that is, its central role and fundamental purpose—is to uphold public justice, that is, to encourage other organizations under its jurisdiction to fulfill their respective obligations and to adjudicate and protect the rights of other citizens and organizations to just and fair treatment in keeping with their unique, God-created norms (Koyzis, 2003; Sherrat, 1999; Skillen, 1994).

The key similarity in both subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty is an understanding that government has a unique, overarching—but also limited—role with respect to all the other types of social organizations. Government is not simply one among other entities, but has special responsibilities and obligations toward all of the citizens and residents within its jurisdiction. All other types of organizations can limit their memberships and therefore can choose whom to serve or include.

While the specifics of each of these viewpoints is beyond the scope of this chapter, the key difference is that subsidiarity tends to a more vertical and hierarchical ordering of social institutions, whereas sphere sovereignty views various social entities as being arranged horizontally (Chaplin, 1995; Koyzis, 2003).

## Individuals within complex societies

A Christian worldview also provides an understanding of the nature of humans and their roles and characteristics within diverse, pluralistic, and complex societies. The fundamental characteristic of humans, according to this view, is that we are created as image-bearers of God (see Genesis 1 -2; Middleton & Walsh, 1995, ch. 6). Exactly what that means has been a matter of much debate, but it includes at least that we image God's "we-ness" and his creativity. God said, "Let us make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness" (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added). God's plural self-identification alludes to his three-in-one personhood as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can infer from this that God is relational and social, and that we, as His image-bearers, are also relational and social. To be human—to image God—is to be in mutual, harmonious, independent relationships with others; the reverse is also true: when we are isolated from others or when our relationships are constrained, limited, or broken, then we are in some way less than fully human as God intended. The various types of social entities discussed above are an indication of the many ways in which we humans have lived out our relational character.

We are also creative beings with the capacity to envision and imagine. We mirror God by harnessing our talents, gifts, and resources to build and establish physical structures and social arrangements and to make something of ourselves and the world (Crouch, 2008). Further, our being made in God's image as creative beings also carries with it the responsibility to use our creative energy for God's purposes and for others' benefit. Neil Plantinga (1995) describes this as follows:

[W]e are to become *responsible* beings: people to whom God can entrust deep and worthy assignments, expecting us to make something significant of them—expecting us to make something significant of our lives. None of us simply finds himself here in the world. None of our lives is an accident. We have been called into existence, expected, awaited, equipped, and assigned. We have been called to undertake the stewardship of a good creation, to create sturdy and buoyant families that pulse with the glad give-and-take of the generations. We are expected to show hospitality to strangers and to express gratitude to friends and teachers. We have been assigned to seek justice for our neighbors and, whenever we can, to relieve them from the tyranny of their suffering (p. 197; emphasis added).

As image-bearers of God, we carry both responsibilities and rights. We are responsible, as Plantinga argues, to both God and others. But, we have the right to basic treatment and conditions, not because we deserve them, or only because of our worth as humans, but also so that we have what we need in order to carry out those responsibilities. Responsibility cannot be exercised without adequate resources to enable us to fulfill our calling. Part of what it means to image God's creativeness is that we participate in creation and its unfolding. The

capacity to participate is therefore a fundamental ingredient in our life together (Coffin, 2000; Mott, 1996).

What role do individual Christians have in complex societies? Christian sociologist Brad Breems (2001) argues that we must be “critical—curative.” To be critical is to be discerning about our contemporary culture and its spirits, and how these complement and diverge from God’s intentions. It requires keen observation into the world around us, as well as a regular rootedness in God’s ways via Scripture, prayer and meditation. But, to be critical alone is not sufficient. Breems argues we must also be curative—that is, we must use our discernment and insights as a call to action to bring healing (or *shalom*, see Gornick, 2002) where there is brokenness and pain.

To be critical and curative is not only to bring healing to individual hurt and pain, but also to apply God’s word of redemption to the structures of society as well. We know that all of creation groans under the weight of sin (Romans 8:21-22), and thus that God’s redemption plan includes not only people, but all other parts of creation, including the social organizations and institutions within which we humans live out our social lives together. The apostle Paul says God makes us ambassadors in his reconciliation plan (II Cor. 5: 17-20). This means that we are appointed as God’s representatives to carry out his work to fix the brokenness. A lofty mandate, to be sure, but not one that tempts us to conclude that our way is best or right. Richard Mouw (1992) reminds us of the need to avoid triumphalism and take on an attitude of humility and civility, even as we carry on with confidence the work to which we have been called.

### **Implications in Three Areas**

In sum, a Christian worldview provides a framework for understanding humans and their place in an increasingly complex post-industrial society (Poe, 2002; Walsh & Middleton, 1984). Further, this worldview provides a way for Christians to make sense of the conflicting claims in a diverse culture, particularly when so many of these claims are counter to, if not outright inimical, to God’s claims. Directional and associational pluralism recognizes that there must be space and allowance for people to associate and conduct themselves in accordance with their own worldview, beliefs, or doctrine, even if others would view such conduct as unacceptable. We also recognize that the impulse we witness in ourselves and our neighbors to associate and gather together for an infinite number of reasons and ascribing to a wide variety of beliefs is evidence of our being made in God’s image, even if we believe others’ choices to be disobedient to God’s will.

Three social welfare policy issues serve as examples of the implications of this framework: the role of faith-based groups in addressing social problems, the rights of persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (GLBT) to adopt or foster children, and the social welfare responsibilities of business corporations. Although each of these issues merits more attention to be addressed

adequately, the purpose here is to show how the Christian worldview sketched above helps us to think about complex social welfare issues.

### *Faith-based Organizations*

Christians disagree about the extent to which faith groups, especially churches, should be responsible for social problems and in particular whether religion should replace government as the primary social institution responsible for addressing the needs of our most vulnerable citizens (Wuthnow, 2004).

Fundamental to these issues is an understanding of the role of government *vis-à-vis* other social institutions. According to the framework described in the first part of this paper, government has a special responsibility to uphold justice. Mott (1996) elaborates on this by distinguishing between government's obligation to protect people from bad things (what he calls negative justice) and ensuring that people have access to good things (positive justice) in order to allow individuals to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities. Government, therefore, must not surrender its responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, particularly toward those who are most vulnerable. With respect to religious organizations' role in social welfare, government must provide a context that encourages their participation, but does not offload a social welfare responsibility onto religion (Bane, Coffin, & Thiemann, 2000; Daly, 2005).

On the other hand, the practice in both the USA and Canada in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been to marginalize and exclude some religious organizations from social welfare participation unless those organizations are willing to give up some aspect of their faith in order to adhere to a secular, allegedly value-free perspective that is often the price of participation in social welfare provision, especially with public funding (Donaldson & Carlson-Thies, 2003; Monsma, 1996).

Legal and regulatory practice regarding the limitation of public funding of religious organizations in the USA, and similar practices in Canada (despite the lack of an explicit principle of church-state separation; Hiemstra, 2002) has been until recently based on a separationist principle that restricts religious organizations' access to public funding. The implication of structural and confessional pluralism, however, is that a new relationship between government and faith-based organizations becomes possible (Vanderwoerd, 2002). Rather than regarding government aid to faith-based organizations as a violation of the First Amendment, this kind of pluralism would mean that faith-based organizations be given the same opportunity for access to public dollars as other nonprofit organizations.

In other words, organizations should not be prevented from accessing public funding on the basis of their religious beliefs, or because the services for which they seek funding are explicitly religious. Rather, the principle of structural and confessional pluralism would enable various organizations to maintain the integrity of their particular religious beliefs and still participate in particular aspects of public life.

Some legal scholars have suggested that the concept of neutrality (sometimes also referred to as "equal treatment") provides a legal interpretation that



acknowledges this pluralism compared to earlier separationist interpretations that operated according to a “no aid to religion” principle (Esbeck, 1997; Monsma, 1993, 2000). The neutrality principle allows for individuals and groups to participate fully in the public square without having to leave their personal religious or secular viewpoints at home. Esbeck (1997), for example, in support of government funding for faith-based social service organizations, suggests that, ...the neutrality principle rejects the three assumptions made by separationist theory: that the activities of faith-based charities are severable into “sacred” and “secular” aspects, that religion is “private” whereas government monopolizes “public” matters, and that governmental assistance paid to service providers is aid to the providers as well as aid to the ultimate beneficiaries (p. 21-22).

With the rejection of these first two assumptions, neutrality theory is consistent with the concept of structural and confessional pluralism. Further, this principle suggests an approach which does not violate the intentions of the First Amendment, namely, that government neither advance nor restrict religious belief, but allow its citizens and groups autonomy regarding religious conviction and practice.

Finally, in the interest of protecting religious autonomy, the neutrality principle improves on the separationist interpretation that attempted to divide religious organizations’ activities into secular and “pervasively sectarian” categories. Recognizing that religious beliefs are expressed across the spectrum of human life—and not just constrained to either private life or to the church—the neutrality principle allows faith-based organizations (FBOs) to receive public money and still maintain their religious integrity in the particular work they do. The concept of neutrality, therefore, is seen to provide a legal framework that opens the way for government funding of faith-based organizations while remaining true to the intentions of the First Amendment.

The legislative and regulative changes associated with the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives represent a level of recognition and space for religious expression in public life that is overdue. Reducing the religious barriers to accessing government funds acknowledges that faith is more than just the private beliefs of individuals, but that it also centrally directs a society’s public life. Further, in a diverse country, space must be allowed for the public expression of many faiths, rather than the imposition of either the majority’s faith perspective, or an allegedly neutral secular perspective. On this basis alone, the “newer deal,” as these developments have been called (Cnaan, 1999), is a welcome advance in social welfare policy.

Despite this promise, unanswered questions remain. First, the claims of superior effectiveness of faith-based organizations in addressing social problems compared to secular alternatives must be subjected to more rigorous evaluation. Appropriate social science techniques must be employed to identify and test the unique characteristics of faith-based services (Boddie & Cnaan, 2006). Such evaluation is particularly necessary to avoid uncritically favoring faith-based organizations over secular services absent other criteria for effectiveness.

Second, it would be a grave mistake to imagine that increasing the par-

ticipation of faith-based providers with government funds can substitute for a governmental responsibility. Social problems have never been due solely to personal failures or personal sin, and individually focused solutions will never solve the deeper-seated structural and systemic failures that are also implicated in social problems. When God calls his people to be ambassadors of reconciliation it is clear that this reconciliation is not reserved just for personal and individual brokenness, but for *all* creation. Government—faith partnerships should be part of the solution, but can never be the whole solution.

### *Same Sex Adoption and Fostering*

The right of persons who are gay and lesbian to adopt or foster children is even more controversial and contested than the role of religion in social welfare. However, just as associational and directional diversity allow space for religious organizations to participate in social welfare with public funding and support, so also does this principle provide space for gays and lesbians to live out their choices without discrimination.

Many Christians find this position unsettling because it appears to condone or even encourage behavior and practices that they believe are fundamentally contrary to God's intent. It is important to note at the outset that Christians disagree about what God's will is for same-sex relationships (Christian Scholar's Review, 1997; Zahniser & Kagle, 2007). Regardless of one's position on the legitimacy of same-sex relationships, however, the issue here is what government's role ought to be with respect to two other types of social structures: marriage and the family.

The concepts of confessional and structural pluralism, as described above, suggest that we must be willing to accord others the right to live their lives according to their fundamental assumptions and beliefs (whether explicitly religious or otherwise) and for these beliefs to be allowed expression not only in people's choices about religious activities and expression (i.e., confessional pluralism), but also in the way they participate in other social entities (i.e., structural pluralism). Skillen (1994) argues this point as follows:

The Constitution does not give government the right to confound religion with, or to confine religion to, institutional churches.... If...citizens are given legitimate protection under the Constitution to practice their religions freely (confessional pluralism), then all citizens should be free to conduct family life, schooling, and other social practices (structural pluralism) in ways that are consistent with the obligations of their deepest presuppositions and faiths (pp. 86-87).

The principle of sphere sovereignty provides further parameters on what authority different spheres should or should not exercise. In this case, government's authority is to provide the context for individuals and groups to exercise their responsibilities according to their convictions. Thus, government should not limit or constrain individuals or groups unless there is some direct reason connected to the general welfare or, in Catholic social thought, the common

good. The neutral stance that government takes with respect to religious organizations in social welfare is also called for here: government cannot implicitly or explicitly endorse a particular arrangement or structure for families unless and only if there is a compelling reason to do so to serve the common good (Van Geest, 2002).

The issue here is for government to act in such a way as to enhance public justice and further the common welfare or good of all without infringing on the rights of individuals or groups to live according to their own beliefs. In particular, it is important for government to protect minority groups from having the will of the majority imposed upon them. Indeed, in the Netherlands, both Protestants and Catholics combined their numbers and argued for space and protection from secular perspectives, arguing their position on the basis of sphere sovereignty and subsidiarity. In that country, religious groups get full access to public funding for schools, agencies, media outlets, and many other institutions (Glenn, 2000); as well, the Netherlands also provides greater freedom for same-sex couples to marry.

The importance of the public justice principle becomes apparent if we engage in a fictional thought experiment and we envision several hypothetical alternative scenarios unfolding in the future:

- Jews have become the dominant religion, and most of them have concluded that all boys and men should be circumcised; or,
- Muslims have become the majority, and most of them believe that all women and girls must wear a *hijab* (the traditional head covering) at all times in public; or,
- Christians who interpret the bible literally are in the majority, and most of them have concluded that women must keep their hair long.

Now imagine that in any one of these fictional scenarios a couple with a short-haired wife, or a mother without a *hijab*, or an uncircumcised father wants to adopt or foster a child. If the appropriate child welfare professionals have determined that the family would be suitable, are there any grounds for a state government, in any of the three scenarios above, to pass a law to prevent short-haired women, non-*hijab* wearing mothers, or uncircumcised fathers from fostering or adopting? Unless there is some compelling evidence to conclude that short-haired women, non-*hijab* wearing mothers, or uncircumcised fathers present a clear danger or harm to children, the answer clearly would be “no.”

No matter how much we as individuals might strongly disagree with these couples' choices about hair length, head coverings, or circumcision, we would hardly expect the government to pass laws to restrict such choices, even if we find them morally repugnant according to *our* faith beliefs. The same is true for gay or lesbian partners who wish to adopt or foster children. There is compelling (Patterson, 2004)—though disputed (Dailey, 2001)—research evidence that gay or lesbian parents are no better or worse than heterosexual parents, and that children of gay or lesbian parents are no more or less likely to become gay or lesbian or to develop sexual identity problems.

The role of the state is not to attempt to define and enforce morally correct behavior or choices unless it can be clearly demonstrated that such behavior threatens the common good or limits public justice. It is the role of the state to provide safe alternatives for neglected, abused, and troubled children whose own parents or families have failed them. Whether homosexuality or head coverings or circumcision or hair length is morally right or wrong is not a matter for public laws, but for churches, synagogues, temples, families, and couples to determine. Governments must provide the liberty and capacity for these groups to make these choices for themselves, not pass laws that impose the choices or beliefs of one group over others.

The task for Christians in social work is to attempt to discern God's norms for the social entity called the family. If our ultimate goal is to facilitate the development of healthy relationships, then that overrides our faith conviction about the morality of same sex partners as adoptive or foster parents. In the three hypothetical examples above, it is clear that appealing to a higher norm leads one to see past the convictions of other groups with whom we disagree about women's hair length, head coverings, or male circumcision as criteria by which to assess the suitability of an adoptive or foster placement.

### *Business Corporations*

People seldom think of business corporations when thinking about social welfare policy or social problems. Nevertheless, the corporation has become a major provider of social welfare benefits in most post-industrial economies, and even further, has enormous influence—both negative and positive—over many people's lives, both directly and indirectly, via its economic activity and decisions (Lodge & Wilson, 2006). Even aside from the substantial role that private corporations play in social welfare, the Christian worldview articulated here leads to the inclusion of this somewhat unusual example.

Business corporations tend to fly under the radar when social welfare is discussed, but here, too, the concept of sphere sovereignty asserts that business corporations are not autonomous, but have their authority and legitimacy in God's creational design for social life. Further, God's creational order provides parameters for how business corporations function in relationship to other social organizations (such as families, schools, unions, nonprofits, and so on) and to government. Antonides (1978) develops this as follows:

A business enterprise must respond to a broader variety of social norms than merely the economic; it must take into consideration a broader variety of interests than merely the financial yardstick of profit. A business enterprise—also a multinational corporation—must take into account the interests of investors, but also the interests of the suppliers of natural resources, of the workers, of the consumers, and of persons and social structures—especially families—that are directly or indirectly affected by the enterprise's productive activity. An economic enterprise is never closed off from its social environment and the slogan "free enterprise" should not blind us to this fact. An economic enterprise must display its own normative structuration—"sphere sovereignty"—in the context

of societal/interdependence and intertwinement (p. 178).

A business corporation is one among many types of social structures, with its own unique characteristics and properties or norms. What, then, is the purpose or function of a business corporation? What way does a business corporation represent obedience or disobedience to God's norms? The vast majority of Christians who have wrestled with these questions tend to focus exclusively on the ethical behavior of the persons who own or run the company (Rae & Wong, 2004). Here the emphasis is on developing a set of ethical principles or guidelines which are presumed to distinguish between a Christian or biblical and a so-called secular way of managing a business (Novak, 2004). None of these, however, gets at the underlying question of *what* a business corporation is, and what its purpose is other than to generate wealth or profit.

As with the previous two issues, the foundation laid from the perspective outlined in the first part of the paper provides the basis for understanding the underlying and fundamental aspects of business corporations. Vandezande (1984), drawing on the concept of sphere sovereignty, distinguishes between the business corporation and the business enterprise:

I view the *corporation* as the entity that legally "owns" and administers the financial investments of the shareholders. I view the business *enterprise* as the human work-community that has the organizational obligation to develop and implement stewardly aims and activities. While the corporation is the legal trustee of the shareholders' financial investments, such as land, buildings, machinery, and equipment, it does not own the enterprise. A human work-community and its talents cannot be owned (p. 72).

Bob Goudzwaard (1979), a Dutch Christian economist, in his analysis of capitalism, shows how the biblical emphasis on humans as stewards (Genesis 1-2; Psalm 24) of God's creation provides the origins for the term *economics*. This concept of stewardship is identified as the key characteristic for the business corporation (or *enterprise*, using Vandezande's term) as a social structure. Antonides (1978) develops this further by drawing on the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, whose Christian philosophical framework identified fifteen fundamental aspects of creation and their key characteristics. Included is the economic aspect, for which the key characteristic is the management—or stewardship—of scarce resources (Kalsbeek, 1975; Skillen, 1979).

As Antonides (1978) makes clear, the key criterion on which to evaluate the performance of a business corporation, therefore, is according to the biblical principle of stewardship, rather than profit.

The norm for a business enterprise as an economically qualified societal structure is stewardship. This must be the key guideline in all its activities. The realization of the norm of stewardship entails a careful use and allocation of natural resources, labor, managerial talent, capital, etc., so that an economic surplus is attained as a result of economic productive activity. This economic surplus can be measured in a financial manner in terms of profit. But, as soon as we mention the word profit, a warning is in order because of the loaded history of that term. A business enterprise must respond to a broader variety of social

norms than merely the economic; it must take into consideration a broader variety of interests than merely the financial yardstick of profit (p. 178).

Indeed, many in the secular business world have become increasingly aware that profit as “the bottom line” is no longer adequate, and, in the end, has become counterproductive to sound business practice (Batstone, 2003; Norman & MacDonald, 2004). As well, some Christians have begun to acknowledge that the concept of stewardship is fundamental to understanding business corporations and discerning whether their activities and performance are consistent with God’s will (Krueger, 1997; Stackhouse, McCann, Roels, & Williams, 1995).

A Christian worldview that recognizes the God-created diversity of social structures and their norms also brings into focus business corporations when social workers consider the question of how to love one’s neighbour in a society of strangers. The acronym TINA—There Is No Alternative—has been used by critics of globalization to draw attention to the way in which the role of corporations and the structures and arrangements of a free market economy are presumed to be off limits when debating such controversial policy issues such as free trade, worker rights, minimum wages, and social benefits. As Christians who confess that Christ’s lordship extends to all His creation, we reject TINA and boldly assert instead that “...there are thousands of alternatives” (Kang, 2005, p. 10), and that discerning these means careful examination of business corporations not simply according to the dominant norm of profitability-at-all-costs, but to a broader assessment of how corporations measure up to God’s norms for constructive wealth creation (Heslam, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Social workers operating from the perspective sketched here can no longer afford to focus entirely on the role of government as the sole provider of social welfare, or, in the other extreme, argue that individuals and churches acting charitably are solely responsible. The simple command to “love your neighbor as yourself” turns out to be exceedingly complicated in the context of complex, diverse societies, where most of our neighbors are anonymous strangers. In small, homogenous, self-contained, and independent communities, the practice of loving one’s neighbor – and sharing the responsibility for others’ welfare – is comparatively easy. As modern industrialized and capitalist nation-states emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, needs born of new social problems outstripped the capacity of the welfare community, welfare family, or welfare tribe (Chatterjee, 1996). The welfare state filled the gap, and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century had all but replaced the family and the community as the primary institution responsible for social welfare. The welfare state has become a way in which we can collectively love our neighbor.

However, under pressure from neo-conservative governments, reduced revenues, and soaring costs, cracks appeared in the welfare state in the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Social workers—along with other left-leaning groups—reacted predictably by advocating nearly unanimous calls to shore up

the welfare state (Mishra, 1999; Klein, 2007; Raphael, 2007). In fact, advocating for social justice has become nearly synonymous with support for government-driven and financed welfare state expansion (Schneider & Netting, 1999), and questioning this is viewed as heresy and abandonment of social work values (Belcher, Fandetti, & Cole, 2004; Chatterjee, 2002; personal communication, October 31, 2002).

At the same time, public support for an advanced welfare state has waned substantially since the 1970s, and there is widespread sentiment that the welfare state has produced an “entitlement” society that fails to reward or encourage responsibility. It is no coincidence that the 1996 welfare reform legislation signed into law by former president Bill Clinton was named the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.”

As well, many evangelical Christians have become increasingly vocal in their resistance to the perceived domination of the welfare state, and particularly in the way in which the welfare state as an institution has been part of what is perceived as a sustained “liberal” attack on the traditional structures of society, particularly marriages and families. Thus, we have an impasse where social workers and other professions associated with the “liberal elite” support the welfare state, pitted against conservatives and many religious persons who support a reduced government role and renewed support for traditional approaches to solving compelling social problems (Hodge, 2003 2004; Olasky, 1992; Schwartz, 2000)

The understanding of society described in this paper—drawing on Catholic social thought and Protestant Reformed thinking, particularly in the neo-Calvinist tradition—provides a way to circumvent this standoff and point us in a direction where Jesus’ admonition that anyone in need is a neighbor can be implemented realistically in complex, diverse societies. Sphere sovereignty (and the similar Catholic concept of subsidiarity) suggests that society consists of multiple social structures, and that each has a unique function and a legitimate area of responsibility commensurate with its characteristics and in obedience to God’s norms.

Although it is true that we can never be absolutely confident that we fully understand these structures and their norms (Mouw, 1992; Wolterstorff, 1995), that should not stop us from trying. A long tradition of Christian scholarship and practice has established public justice and the pursuit of the common good as the special purview of government (Hiemstra, 2005). This means that government has the responsibility to ensure that all persons and groups under its jurisdiction are encouraged and supported to participate and fulfill their responsibilities. This does *not* mean, however, that government has the only responsibility for social welfare.

Confessional and structural pluralism entail a social order in which persons are able to associate both according to their fundamental beliefs (whether explicitly religious or not) across the full spectrum of social structures, and not simply within the social structure of formal religion via churches, synagogues, mosques, and other bodies of worship. Faith-based organizations, therefore,

should have the same access to public funding for social welfare services as secular organizations.

In a similar way, if two persons of the same sex, on the basis of their fundamental beliefs about the world, seek to partner to adopt or foster children, government ought not to restrict such persons from that choice, or at least, from the legal, regulative, and welfare benefits that are available to heterosexual persons who adopt or foster.

Finally, Christians in social work can participate with others to draw attention to the ways in which corporations, as one of many God-created social structures, live up not simply to the norms of the market, but to the higher obligations to which God calls them.

Christians in social work must develop increasing sensitivity to the wide variety of confessions out there, especially when they differ from our own. We know too well our own substantial rifts even within the body of Christ. Our task is to attempt to discern the sources of social brokenness and seek to bring healing by facilitating and equipping other social entities to fulfill the obligations and expectations which God has set for them. Our call as social workers is to exercise compassion—not coercion—in pursuit of shalom.

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