

Making Sense of Pluralism: A Neo-Calvinist Approach

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Pluralism is a particular concern for philosophers of education. From whether (and how) to introduce controversial topics into public school classrooms, to whether (and how) to offer different kinds of education to students from different cultural backgrounds, to whether (and how) to regulate non-public schools (including religious schools) and homeschoolers, philosophy of education discussions abound with questions of how best to educate young people for life in the midst of inescapable pluralism. Yet there is rarely any clarity regarding the meaning of ‘pluralism,’ much less whether (and to what extent) it is a good to be sought out and protected. It might seem that this simply makes us pluralists about pluralism itself! In fact, however, it merely leaves us confused about the relationships among different kinds of pluralism, and often talking past one another.

In this paper I offer a way of understanding pluralism from a perhaps unexpected source. Educational philosophers do not often expect to hear much of value regarding pluralism from traditional religions, and especially not Christianity. Yet certain Christian thinkers have developed a particularly sophisticated and nuanced approach to pluralism, building on the work of nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper.¹ By considering this Neo-Calvinist approach to pluralism, philosophers of education can not only benefit from its substantive insights regarding how to make sense of pluralism but also discover surprising allies in the quest for genuine pluralism.²

A TAXONOMY OF PLURALISM

The Neo-Calvinist approach to pluralism starts with the famous taxonomy developed by Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen. Mouw and Griffioen identify three types of pluralism that they consider worth discussing: *associational* or *structural pluralism*, *contextual* or *cultural pluralism*, and *directional* or *spiritual pluralism*.³

Structural pluralism refers to the many types of groups, associations, organizations, and institutions that humans form and in which they find themselves, including (but not limited to) families, schools, clubs, businesses (both large and small), formal religious institutions and informal religious communities, and different levels of political units. It is worth noting that structural pluralism cuts in two directions: not only are these different *types* of associations different from one another (families do not operate according to the same rules and procedures as schools, which do not operate according to the same rules and procedures as businesses, and so on), but also two instances of the *same* type of association differ in meaningful ways (two families may have different ways of addressing one another and taking care of household chores; two schools may have different curricula and grading procedures; two businesses may have different hiring procedures and expectations for employees' use of time; and so on.).

Some, but not all, of these differences stem in turn from *contextual pluralism*. Here Mouw and Griffioen point to the wide variety of ways in which we are always already situated socially: we all have “different racial, ethnic, geographic, gender, and class experiences.”²⁴ As philosopher James K. A. Smith explains, “*Contextual* pluralism names the wide array of cultural differences that take root in regions and peoples, in languages and literatures. New York is not Jakarta; Peoria is not Seattle.”²⁵ Political philosopher David Koyzis further explains, “for the most part cultural diversity is rooted in our created limitations: we are limited creatures rooted in specific localities and communities, bounded by geographical, historical, economic, and political factors.”²⁶ These limitations and localities mean that we have been shaped by *these* influences rather than *those*, and so we see and respond to the world in *this* way, not another.

Of course, neither structural pluralism nor contextual pluralism, nor even some combination of the two, can account for all of the differences we see and experience in our world today. Often, our differences are much deeper, stretching right down to the way we conceive of the good life and the overall direction in which we try to orient ourselves and our society. Mouw

and Griffioen refer to this as *directional pluralism*, although they admit that this is not an ideal term.⁷ We are most familiar with directional pluralism in the case of the various religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.). Yet the writers who adopt this taxonomy of pluralism insist that directional pluralism is more than simply religious diversity: people's lives can also be shaped and given *direction* by non-religious and secular ideologies (for example, Marxism, feminism, or one or another kind of liberalism), as well as various "spiritualities" and "philosophies of life" that may be more or less articulated and systematized (such as an overriding commitment to artistic expression or to care for the environment).⁸ James K. A. Smith summarizes directional pluralism as "the deepest sort of 'confessional' pluralism in a world where people have fundamentally different visions of the good . . . To live in a directionally pluralist society is to inhabit a world where we disagree about 'the ultimate.'"⁹

Mouw and Griffioen acknowledge a variety of ways in which these categories interact, rendering the borders between them fluid and difficult to discern. For example, "our associational structures serve diverse directional orientations and our spiritual visions take on associational shapes;" that is, a school or business built on Catholic principles will look fundamentally different from one that does not share the same foundation.¹⁰ The close connection between structural pluralism and directional pluralism is manifest also in debates regarding who gets to make decisions in important and controversial matters.¹¹ Similarly, what appears to be contextual pluralism may in fact be an instance of either structural or directional pluralism; Mouw and Griffioen dwell here on the difficulties Westerners often have in classifying and interpreting the practices of non-Western peoples.¹² Nevertheless, they insist that the categories remain both distinguishable and meaningful. As they summarize, "A Mexican Catholic family is different from an Italian Catholic family, as well as from a Mexican Pentecostal family and a Mexican Catholic school."¹³

RESPONDING TO PLURALISMS

While the distinctions among directional, contextual, and structur-

al pluralisms advance our discussion of pluralism, another important step remains. It is not sufficient to analyze the *de facto* realities of the pluralisms we face; we must also decide how to *evaluate* and *respond to* those pluralisms. Here too, Mouw and Griffioen offer a helpful distinction: “The pluralism label is sometimes used as a means of *advocating* diversity. We can think of this as the *normative* sense of the term.... The pluralism label, however, can also be used in a *descriptive* sense, not necessarily as a means of advocating that diversity, but simply as a way of *acknowledging* its existence as a fact that is worth noting.”¹⁴ However, we need to clarify that *normative evaluations* of pluralism(s) *may* be positive (as mentioned by Mouw and Griffioen), but they may also be *negative*. Thus, we can respond to a particular instance of (descriptive) pluralism by either approving and advocating it or by disapproving and resisting it (or, of course, by remaining neutral toward it).

Ethicist Matthew Kaemingk adds a third category between descriptive pluralism and normative pluralism: “A *juridical pluralist* argues that cultural, structural, and directional diversity deserves more than description; it deserves judicial and political protection as well.” This might sound like just another version of (positive) normative pluralism, but according to Kaemingk, they are meaningfully different: “A *normative pluralist* not only wants to faithfully describe and politically defend diversity but also wants to morally affirm and praise diversity as a normative good.”¹⁵ For example, juridical pluralism with respect to educational structures would involve defending the legal right to existence of non-public schooling options, including religious schools and homeschooling, without necessarily thinking that it is *good* for some children to be educated in these non-public settings (as a normative pluralist would argue). With respect to deep pluralism, a juridical pluralist would not necessarily *approve* of the fact that people adhere to a plurality of life-directions and worldviews, but she *would* think that people should not be subject to legal or political sanctions (fines, losing the right to vote, imprisonment, execution) for following a worldview other than her own. The fact that we extend toleration and even legal protection to beliefs and behaviors that we ourselves find abhorrent indicates the importance of the distinction

between juridical and normative pluralism.

Based on these distinctions, we can see that most people today are descriptive *pluralists* of one kind or another; that is, hardly anyone would dispute the reality of vast and varied differences in our world today. As sociologist of religion James Davison Hunter notes, “Pluralism in its most basic expression is nothing more than the simultaneous presence of multiple cultures and those who inhabit those cultures. . . . Under the conditions of modernity and late modernity, then, the incidence of pluralism has increased massively, which means that average people experience it more frequently and more intensely than ever before in human history.”¹⁶ This basic fact of unavoidable pluralism forms the backdrop against which our evaluations of and responses to pluralism are called forth. In fact, the “empirical reality of different beliefs and convictions existing within a given territorial (and possibly political) community” is so widely recognized that it can be referred to as a “truism.”¹⁷

Yet perhaps we should not be too quick to dismiss descriptive pluralism as trivial and uninteresting. Kaemingk insists that truly being a descriptive pluralist involves not merely acknowledging the reality of pluralism but also “faithfully describ[ing] the diversity of individuals, cultures, faiths, and institutions within a given society Descriptive pluralists are committed to carefully and honestly understanding the deep diversity all around them.”¹⁸ He argues that descriptive pluralism, in this fuller sense, is a high calling:

At first blush, committing oneself to merely describing diversity accurately does not sound like a difficult task. That said, . . . there is a consistent pattern in the West of reducing diverse and multifaceted cultures, communities, and faiths to simplistic caricatures . . . the simple act of listening and paying attention to the complexity of human life is not only a critical skill; it is a virtue.¹⁹

Such careful attentiveness and description do not come naturally to most of us; it must be learned. At a minimum, then, any adequate education for life in the midst of pluralism must equip young people to attend to and

carefully articulate the diversity that they encounter.

Even so, acknowledging the reality and even the complexity of pluralism(s) is only one part of any account of pluralism. We must also *evaluate* any given pluralism and decide how to *respond* to it. Is this instance of pluralism a good to be valued and protected, an evil to be squashed, or somewhere in between? Mouw and Griffioen offer a two-pronged evaluation of the categories of pluralism that they identify: they whole-heartedly approve both contextual and structural pluralisms, while they acknowledge but do not approve directional pluralism, on the grounds that to approve the latter would be inconsistent with their understanding of the Christian gospel.²⁰

Some more recent thinkers nuance Mouw and Griffioen's evaluation in interesting ways; it is worth dwelling on their own evaluations in order to demonstrate the complexity of possible responses to pluralism. First, James K. A. Smith echoes Mouw and Griffioen's approval of *structural* pluralism: "This plurality of social structures is rooted in a *creational* calling. Families and schools and businesses aren't just 'good ideas' that we came up with; they are forged in response to something that creation itself calls for."²¹ Smith also echoes Mouw and Griffioen's refusal to approve *directional* pluralism: "With this taxonomy, what we get is 'two cheers' for pluralism: a normative 'celebration' of pluralism with respect to structural and cultural plurality, while directional/confessional plurality is descriptively recognized and constructively addressed but not normatively celebrated."²² At the same time, Smith presses hard at the connection between structural and directional pluralisms. Importantly, this connection is not limited to the question of "who decides" (a point that Mouw and Griffioen acknowledge but do not explore as thoroughly as could be wished).²³ Smith argues that, just like different directional orientations, so too different structural configurations (whether of a family, a school, a state, or any other group) can be evaluated as either good or bad, for two reasons. First, a "live and let live" approach to the patterns of human associations can have "disastrous social effects" on the "poor and vulnerable," something that those whose (directional) vision of the good life includes an important place for justice should care deeply about.²⁴ And second,

the ways in which we habitually interact with one another and the world are *formative*—that is, they shape us in particular ways, leading us to notice some things and not others, to act in some ways and not others, to care about some things and not others.²⁵ Clearly, both of these arguments have significant implications for education for living well in the midst of pluralism.

Second, and even more interestingly, Kaemingk breaks down the evaluation of various pluralisms even further. He agrees with Mouw and Griffioen's endorsement of descriptive pluralism of all kinds: "First, a Christian pluralist will—without a doubt—fully embrace *descriptive pluralism*. She will take the deep differences of cultures, communities, and faiths seriously. She will do so because she believes human beings are worthy of careful listening, analysis, and description because they are made in the image of God."²⁶ As we saw above, Kaemingk highlights that descriptive pluralism is not easily or simply achieved: we all too often end up glossing over the very differences we claim to protect and celebrate. We also saw above that Kaemingk distinguishes juridical pluralism from both descriptive and normative pluralism, a distinction not present in Mouw and Griffioen. He further argues in favor of juridical pluralism: "Second, on the question of *juridical pluralism*, the Christian pluralist will absolutely insist that her government project the legal rights and freedoms of different cultures, religions, associations, and ideologies from undue harassment and harm."²⁷ Although he echoes Mouw and Griffioen's positive normative response to cultural and structural pluralism, he also agrees with James K. A. Smith's insistence that even a strong approval of cultural and structural pluralism *in general* must leave room to evaluate *particular* expressions of cultural and structural diversity.²⁸ Some cultures are objectively more conducive to human flourishing than others, and some communities and organizations do indisputable harm. Yet this does not mean that variation in cultures and social structures *in itself* is an evil to be resisted; quite the opposite.

But what of directional pluralism, that most challenging type of pluralism? Kaemingk, like both Mouw and Griffioen and James K. A. Smith, responds to directional pluralism with a negative normative judgment.²⁹ At

the same time, he provides a helpful nuance and clarification of what is and is not compatible with a Christian approach to pluralism:

The Christian pluralist can faithfully describe other faiths, she can passionately defend their rights, and she can even praise their many contributions to the common good. She cannot, however, take delight in the way that they are directing their lives away from God. While she will never force everyone to follow Christ, she cannot—and will not—deny that she wants everyone to know Christ.³⁰

To summarize, then, the Neo-Calvinist Christian tradition of thinking about pluralism wholeheartedly endorses descriptive pluralism, and offers a positive normative response to both structural and contextual pluralism, but insists on a negative normative response to directional pluralism—pluralism of deep beliefs, values, and life-orientations.

PRINCIPLES FOR AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE TO DEEP PLURALISM

So far we have seen that pluralism is not singular but can in fact be divided into several categories: structural, contextual, directional; descriptive, juridical, normative. We have also seen that we can respond to these different pluralisms in different ways; not all who acknowledge the mere factual reality of pluralism consider it a straightforward good to be welcomed and embraced. We are now prepared to take the final and most important step: not only can we distinguish different kinds of pluralism from one another; not only can we evaluate different pluralisms as positive, negative, or neutral; but we can also evaluate our very evaluations of pluralisms, and the ways in which we respond to the pluralisms that we encounter.

Indeed, given the reality that different people respond to different pluralisms differently—that is, what we have to deal with is not merely a plurality of pluralisms but also a plurality of *responses to* the pluralisms—such second-order evaluation is inescapable. The above discussion of the two-pronged response to the pluralisms (approving contextual and structural pluralisms, while disapproving directional pluralism) may have already called

forth such a next-level evaluation from some readers, who may be inclined to assert that Neo-Calvinist Christian pluralists are not really pluralist at all if their support of pluralism does not penetrate beneath the surface. I return to this objection below; first, I want to drive home the point that we cannot avoid engaging in second-order evaluations of our responses to pluralism(s).

Teacher educator David I. Smith emphasizes that the ways we respond to differences can either help or harm our neighbor. “The chances of spending the rest of my life solely in contact with people who are culturally like me is increasingly slim . . . [H]owever, mere contact is no guarantee of learning, peace, or blessing. As contact grows, so does the opportunity for both good and evil, for both blessing and cursing.”³¹ Smith goes on to explain, “Such judgments, which remain open to revision, concerning what to tolerate, what to actively embrace, and what to firmly but courteously resist are an ongoing part of encounter with any culture.”³² It is precisely judgments of this sort that we are interested in here. Similarly, James K. A. Smith points out that even those who are unwilling or unable to approve directional pluralism can still *respond* to that pluralism in better and worse ways: “Many responses to such deep diversity and contestation about the good life seek to overcome it by imposing a hegemonic consensus . . . These are ‘responses’ to pluralism only insofar as they see a de facto reality and seek to normatively quash it.”³³

In fact, one of the key insights of this paper is that *nobody* wholeheartedly endorses and celebrates directional pluralism. We have already seen this above in the case of the Neo-Calvinist approach to pluralism, and it is precisely this feature of that approach that might lead some readers to conclude that this approach is not really pluralistic at all. Yet to make this claim is to apply a false standard, one that *no* approach to pluralism can possibly clear. As Koyzis explains, “Thus even secular ideologues [such as liberals and Marxists] regret directional diversity, even if they are forced to accept it for the sake of peaceful coexistence. But everyone hopes that in the midst of such fundamental disagreements, persuasion will accomplish the task of eliminating or at least diminishing this type of diversity, and most people,

at least nominally, prefer to avoid recourse to coercive means.”³⁴ Koyzis points us in the direction of a better approach to second-order evaluations of responses to directional pluralism: it is not a question of whether the response in question approves or disapproves of directional pluralism (since, ultimately, *everybody* disapproves of it), but rather of what kind of attitudes and actions the response calls for with respect to people and positions we disagree with.³⁵

Once we have given up on the quest for a “pure” pluralism that consistently approves of even the deepest directional differences, we are able to genuinely consider the question of what approaches to pluralism best equip us to “live at peace with those we regard as damned.”³⁶ I suggest that we adopt Kaemingk’s “principled pluralism” test, which states that a response to deep pluralism can be considered adequate if and only if it enables us *both* to hold true to our own principles *and* to make gracious space for others to hold true to their own.³⁷ We most commonly try to deal with pluralism by letting go of the first prong of this test, by holding our own principles lightly or privately. Yet Kaemingk argues, as do I, that this is not only unnecessary, but counter-productive. “The assumption, quite simply, is that in order to be a good pluralist one must let go of one’s own faith and one’s own community . . . [On the contrary,] a durable defense of [non-Christians’] rights and dignity depends, not on ambivalence, but on conviction.”³⁸

Philosopher of education Rachel Wahl investigates this possibility that one’s deepest convictions can in fact support, rather than foreclose, openness to those who are different. In her empirically-informed research on college students’ participation in deliberative dialogues with political “others,” Wahl observes that evangelical Christian students displayed a greater ability to listen to and learn from their peers across the political divide than did secular, liberal students. She argues that, though the effect of these students’ relative positions of success or failure following the 2016 presidential election should not be overlooked, a more important driving factor was the students’ understandings of their own responsibility to bring about change in the world. The secular, liberal students believed that “change occurs through politics” and

therefore they have both the ability and the responsibility to work for a more just world, as they define it.³⁹ In contrast, the evangelical Christian students she interviewed understood themselves as instruments of God's work to change the world, and so were able to approach the interviews non-instrumentally, open to whatever God intended to accomplish through them.⁴⁰ In Wahl's account, it is these students' very confidence in their own beliefs that produces their openness to learning from others: "engaging receptively and respectfully with unbelievers becomes a core principle of faith as well as a sign that one is secure in that faith. By learning from and loving people with diverse beliefs, they do not betray Christ but rather become more like him. Instead of undermining their capacity for belief, therefore, the inevitable encounter with secular worldviews allows evangelical students to deepen it."⁴¹

Yet Wahl recognizes that there is a cost to such receptivity and openness. She describes with great sympathy the liberal students' concerns that the dialogues were a waste of time if they did not change participants' voting behavior (an especially salient concern in the immediate wake of the election of Donald Trump). This demonstrates the difficulty of the principled pluralism test. To the extent that students were open to learning from others, they risked compromising their own deep commitments to see justice realized in the world—a concern that runs throughout Wahl's article, and that would certainly be shared by evangelical educators in other contexts.⁴² On the other hand, by evaluating the dialogues according to the purely instrumental goal of changing the world, participants risked obstructing both pluralism and the very justice they sought to achieve. Ironically, however, the evangelical students were most open to changing their minds when they perceived that their interlocutors were *not* seeking to do so!⁴³ This finding (which is perhaps not so surprising if we reflect on our own willingness to change) indicates that, no matter how difficult, discovering a way to meet the principled pluralism test is a worthwhile task.

1 For a detailed treatment of Kuyper's historical context and the Christian

pluralist movement he initiated, see Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 77–162. See also David Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 228–249, and James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 131–150.

2 Although beyond my scope in this essay, it would be fruitful to put the Neo-Calvinist approach to pluralism into conversation with Nicholas C. Burbules, “A Grammar of Difference: Some Ways of Rethinking Difference and Diversity as Educational Topics,” *Australian Educational Researcher* 24, no. 1 (1997): 97–116.

3 Those who take up Mouw and Griffioen’s taxonomy sometimes use different words to refer to the same types of pluralism. I follow Mouw and Griffioen’s original labels for contextual pluralism and directional pluralism, but prefer the label “structural” to “associational” for the same reason given by Koyzis: “Mouw and Griffioen refer to [structural diversity] as associational diversity, a term I prefer to avoid because of the voluntaristic connotations attached to it.” Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions*, 212n47.

44 Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 17.

5 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 32.

6 Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions*, 209.

7 Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 16.

8 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 17.

9 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 31.

10 Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 88.

11 Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 119-120.

12 Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 151-154.

- 13 Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 17.
- 14 Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 14.
- 15 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 17.
- 16 James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 200-201.
- 17 Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions*, 206.
- 18 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 17.
- 19 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 18.
- 20 Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 17-18.
- 21 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 136.
- 22 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 137.
- 23 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 32.
- 24 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 33-34, 142-144.
- 25 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 34, 144-150.
- 26 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 18.
- 27 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 18.
- 28 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 18.
- 29 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 19.
- 30 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 19.
- 31 David I. Smith, *Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 22.
- 32 Smith, *Learning from the Stranger*, 125.
- 33 Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 133.
- 34 Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions*, 207.

35 Koyzis further connects different kinds of tolerance to different institutional contexts: “Not only is tolerance limited, but it must also be understood to be a *normed* tolerance governed by principles appropriate to specific communal contexts. For example, while the state rightly tolerates religious diversity within its territorial jurisdiction, the institutional church is under no obligation to do the same.” Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions*, 209, emphasis original.

36 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 16, quoting Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

37 Kaemingk, presentation at Neighborly Faith conference, November 1, 2019.

38 Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 19. For a further elaboration of the idea that conviction, not detachment, underlies the most robust support for pluralism, see John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

39 Rachel Wahl, “Dispelling the Burden of Agency: Receptive Learning During Political Crisis,” *Educational Theory* 68, no. 4–5 (2018): 413.

40 Wahl, “Dispelling the Burden of Agency,” 415-416.

41 Wahl, “Dispelling the Burden of Agency,” 416.

42 Although Wahl does not discuss this in her article, the evangelical students would certainly have had some interest in changing their peers’ minds as well, both religiously—by converting them to evangelical Christianity—and politically—by persuading them of their own vision of justice, for instance regarding abortion.

43 Wahl, “Dispelling the Burden of Agency,” 421-423.