

In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations

James W. Skillen

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James W. Skillen has headed the Center for Public Justice (CPJ) for more than two decades. In that time, he has established himself as one of the more thoughtful voices in the Christian community, drawing on the insights of the tradition associated with Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch Reformed statesman, educator, pastor, and journalist of a century ago. As this tradition is less well known than it should be among North American Christians, Skillen's current contribution represents an effort to disseminate its influence more widely, as well as to apply it to contemporary political issues.

The reference to "Christian-democratic" in the subtitle stems from the European experience that saw Christians in several countries establishing Christian democratic parties, of which Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party was the first. For Skillen, a Christian-democratic approach is unique insofar as it is based on a rejection of the secular ideologies that have marred the political landscape for more than two centuries. Positively, it entails a move "toward a more normative Christian realization of public justice" (2). What are the ingredients of this perspective?

Skillen focuses on four components: the differentiation of state and society, often referred to nowadays, if somewhat misleadingly, as civil society; the irreducible dignity of the human person as God's image-bearer, as manifested in the diverse responsibilities to which everyone is called; economic justice and the place of political community; and international justice. Subsequent chapters unpack these elements with respect to five issues: faith-based welfare reform, racial justice, equal education, environmental protection, and electoral reform. In each case, Skillen brings to bear his Christian-democratic approach, clearly indicating how it offers a genuine alternative to the current options dominating the larger debate.

Skillen begins his discussion with a reflection on what has come to be called civil society, whose varied definitions tend to be excessively vague. If civil society is understood to describe everything that is neither economic nor governmental, then it compresses too much into a single category. Skillen speaks, by contrast, of a normative differentiation of society in which human beings, as complex creatures made in God's image, are "called to fill the earth and to develop the whole creation" (33). In a differentiated society, no one role or responsibility can exhaust human personhood. Each of us, though fully integrated as God's image-bearers, has multiple, mutually compatible responsibilities exercised within a variety of communal settings.

One of the implications of this responsible personhood is confessional pluralism, which is sometimes labelled religious freedom when applied to individuals. In his discussion of faith-based welfare reform in chapter 4, Skillen describes four orders of pluralism that have been influential throughout American history since the establishment of the federal republic at the end of the eighteenth century. The first order, lasting from

1791 until the 1830s, allowed the several states to maintain ecclesiastical establishments. After Massachusetts abolished the last of these, a second order of pluralism ensued. The states and the federal government alike refrained now from establishing specific churches but nevertheless supported a generic Protestant ethos for the country as a whole. During this time, the public schools served to cement a unity that had previously been upheld by the churches in the colonial era. The entire republic was conceived as a “universal (nonsectarian) civil-religious community” (62). The third order of pluralism came to predominate after the Second World War, as the courts handed down decisions based on Jefferson’s famous “wall of separation” between church and state. The public order, along with the schools, became increasingly secularized, with *nonsectarian* seen as tantamount to nonreligious.

By contrast, Skillen argues for a fourth order of pluralism that would provide for even-handed treatment of all confessions whether or not they explicitly style themselves religious. Such an approach would see government, for example, collaborating with private organizations for public purposes, but without discriminating against those with an explicit confessional basis. This is the point of the charitable choice provision in the 1996 welfare reform law. It is also the vision behind those committed to parental priority in the education of their own children, an issue Skillen discusses in chapter 6. Skillen believes that this fourth order of pluralism is compatible with the First Amendment, which does not demand either public secularity or the privatization of religion. It is this approach to pluralism that conditions Skillen’s arguments in the remainder of the book.

In chapter 5, the author tackles the difficult racial issue that has plagued the United States since colonial times. After the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, the current debate is now between those who would use any and every political and legal means to end racism and those who fear too much government intrusion in the lives of citizens. By contrast, Skillen argues that a proper approach to seeking racial justice must recognize the diverse responsibilities held by both individuals and communities for addressing the racial issue. Skillen concludes that in a differentiated society the multiple institutions making it up cannot simply be made subservient to racist and antiracist ends. Rather, they have their own tasks and purposes and must be treated justly on these terms.

In chapter 7, Skillen addresses the ecological issue, judging that the predominant North American Lockean form of liberalism offers an inadequate paradigm for protecting the environment. This is because it tends to view concern for the environment as one more issue among many to be dealt with through the ordinary political and judicial bargaining processes rather than as an integral element of our larger calling to be stewards of God’s creation. In such a context, if no one were willing to contend for the physical environment in competition with loggers, defense contractors, and many others, it would tend to be left out of the policy process. As an alternative, Skillen argues that “the environment must be taken into consideration at a constitutional level” (124), possibly by the adoption of measures similar to existing local zoning laws.

In the eighth and final chapter, Skillen makes a case for electoral reform. In particular, he urges that the United States abandon its first-past-the-post system (FPTP), which distorts representation in Congress—particularly in the House of Representatives. Because the presidency is the only political institution representing the American people as a whole, members of Congress and other officials, who are elected on a local basis, have no incentive to act in the public interest of the entire country. Instead, they tend to speak primarily for particular interests, often to the detriment of the commons. Once again, this points up the central difficulty in the predominant liberalism that reduces the public and common to the aggregate interests of autonomous individuals. As a remedy, Skillen proposes the adoption of a state-by-state party list form of proportional representation (PR) for House elections and, for the presidency, a two-ballot direct popular vote. This would open up the political process to more principled parties, which are handicapped under the present system. One of these could be a Christian-democratic party that will appeal to Christians properly dissatisfied with the current Democratic and Republican monopoly.

In a fairly short book it is, of course, impossible to touch on every issue that might form part of a Christian-democratic program. However, given that many Christians in the United States voted in the 2004 presidential election based on the stances of the two candidates on a range of moral issues, including abortion and the legal definition of marriage, Skillen might have done well to indicate how a Christian-democratic perspective would treat them. Are they central to such a perspective, or are they peripheral? CPJ's stance on such issues is clear from its Web site, but the fact that they are not addressed in this book may limit its appeal in some circles.

Finally, although one might quibble with Skillen on specifics—for example, on which forms of educational choice or PR to adopt—overall his emphasis on government's role in protecting the commons, as well as the diverse nongovernmental responsibilities properly belonging to God's image-bearers, is one that is sorely needed in a North American society caught between the polarizing approaches of individualism and statism.

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Roman Catholic Political Philosophy

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This book represents the most direct and the richest account of the relationship of political philosophy to revelation yet provided by Father James Schall; it is a veritable capstone for a distinguished series of books beginning with *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* in which he examines the relevance of revealed truth to the questions of political philosophy. Schall offers an essay in political philosophy, not theology. He plies the craft of textual interpretation and dialectical