

Differentiated Responsibility and the Challenge of Religious Diversity

David T. Koyzis
Redeemer University College

Avery Dulles is careful to distinguish between religious liberty, which is a positive good commended to us by a succession of recent papal encyclicals, and religious pluralism, which is an empirical reality that is far from good in itself and indeed could threaten to rend the fabric of society through its centrifugal tendencies. In response to this pluralism, Dulles suggests, following John Courtney Murray, that only a broad consensus on a national civil religion can prevent its fragmenting effects from going too far. He thus laments the recent erosion of this consensus and fears its long-term possible consequences.

In response to Dulles, I will do three things: first, to explore religious diversity and the varying approaches that people take to it; second, to indicate how an understanding of what might be called differentiated responsibility helps us to articulate a proper political approach to this diversity; and, finally, to sound a note of hope for the future in the midst of our present crisis of fragmentation.

Why Tolerate Religious Diversity? Secular Liberal and Postliberal Approaches

To begin with, there is a sense, in which all Christians have to agree with Dulles, Murray, and recent popes, that religious diversity is something to be lamented. As believers in the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ and in the salvific significance of his death and resurrection, we are persuaded that those unable or unwilling to accept this for themselves are missing out on the

abundant life. This conviction is what fuels countless evangelistic efforts bent on winning the world for the Gospel. We are, after all, commanded in Scripture, not to hide our light beneath a bushel (Matt. 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33), but to go out into all the world announcing the Good News of salvation (Matt. 28:18–20).

However, because people persist in their unbelief, and because we can no longer accept the precedent of our more zealous forebears and attempt to coerce them into the kingdom of God, we are inevitably confronted by the reality of religious diversity in most Western countries. This presents, among other things, a political problem, which I will try to address in specifically political terms. The problem can be stated in terms of why we should tolerate this religious diversity, which invites a number of answers. These answers can be grouped into two broad categories, the first of which could be labeled *secular liberal* and *postliberal* approaches, and the second of which is more consonant, I argue, with a more *integral Christian* confession and worldview. The secular liberal category can be divided into three approaches.

First, one might take the approach of what could be called *market liberalism*. Market liberals extend the principle of economic competition beyond the marketplace into other areas of life where it does not properly belong. John Stuart Mill takes this approach in his classic defense of liberty of opinion.¹ At a time when most of the governments of continental Europe imposed censorship on the dissemination of unorthodox ideas, nineteenth-century England allowed much greater freedom of speech and of the press to its own citizens. Mill applauds this policy on the assumption that a marketplace of ideas is actually good for the truth and serves to demonstrate its veracity. Confident in the capacity of people to discern the truth when they see it, Mill is convinced that the healthy exchange of divergent opinions will facilitate the emergence of an evident truth.

It takes little imagination to extend Mill's logic into the arena of divergent religious confessions. In no case should a government attempt to enforce a confessional orthodoxy or to suppress heterodoxy, because it is only through a market-style competition among various religious beliefs that we will succeed in attaining the truth. Of course, a central difficulty with a competitive model, even in economics, is that there is no necessary relationship between success on the one hand and truth or goodness on the other. In the real world there is no more guarantee that a victorious religion is necessarily a true religion than that the triumph of the internal combustion engine over electric traction represents a progressive development in the field of transportation.

There is a second variety of liberalism that champions freedom of choice virtually for its own sake. Here the concern is not so much for the truth, as in Mill, as for enhancing the capacity of the sovereign individual to choose as much of his or her own destiny as is feasible and to remove as many facets of life as possible from subjection to heteronomous authority. Such free-choice liberals dislike, not only the State's telling them where to go to church, but *even the Church's* telling them where to go to church. Religion is a personal matter to be decided between the individual and God, however one may conceive of the latter. This appears to be the philosophy behind the ubiquitous church announcements in local newspapers and the phone book's Yellow Pages inviting readers to "attend the Church of your choice." The emphasis is not on *Church*, with all its connotations of community, shared confession, authoritative teaching, and mutual obligation but on *choice*, with its intimations of autonomy and self-determination. For free-choice liberals, religious diversity is a positive good, because the more choices a person has, the more opportunity one has to find a religion tailor-made to one's lifestyle and life goals. Once again, the truth of a particular religion is not at stake—only its conformity to the sovereign will of the individual.

Yet a third approach to religious diversity could be called *postliberal* or even *postmodern*. Remarkably, in this approach there is a return to the language of truth, but truth has been drained of any substantive meaning. Mill himself had argued that one ought not to suppress a largely false opinion for fear of our losing the small amount of truth therein. But postmoderns champion diversity and not so much freedom of choice, for its own sake. All religions, it is argued in its more modest form, contain elements of the truth and are attempting to find the truth as best they understand it. In its less-modest form, the postmodern argument is that all religions are equally valid and equally true, with no attempt being made to provide a criterion for judging truth and distinguishing it from falsehood.

Two problems are raised by this argument. First, it trivializes religion and effectively misunderstands the nature of religious truth claims. It unreasonably demands that Muslims admit, against their own convictions, that at least for Christians, Jesus may be the divine Son of God. It asks Christians to admit, contrary to their own confession, that Jews may be right in denying Jesus' messianic claims for themselves. Or—perhaps more accurately—it invites Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike to deny the revelatory character of their own central beliefs and to see them instead as little more than the man-made products of their deeply felt need to get in touch with the Ultimate. Second, the obvious relativism of the postmodern position is incoherent. After all, the

claim that all truths are equally valid is, itself, an exclusive truth claim that effectively exempts itself from its own assessment of all other truth claims. This observation is, of course, hardly a new or fresh insight, but relativists continue to carry on with their enterprise as though it had never been made. Ironically, any policy of tolerance flowing from the postmodern position is likely to be a severely constricted one, since it is unable to allow religions to function as genuine religions. Thus, what starts out as an undoubtedly genuine attempt to foster tolerance ends up being increasingly intolerant.

A Political Case for Tolerance

All three of the approaches to religious diversity share a common secular worldview that would have been unthinkable prior to the Enlightenment or perhaps even to the French Revolution. The ultimate effect, as Dulles rightly points out, is to relegate Christianity to the margins by denying its public witness. It is unfortunate that many Christians themselves have effectively contributed to a mindset conducive to what Richard John Neuhaus has christened “the naked public square.”² There are, however, sufficiently solid reasons to tolerate religious diversity more congruent with an orthodox Christian confession and based on a sound understanding of the nature and limits of politics.³

To begin with, as I indicated above, we need to distinguish between our responsibilities as church members and as citizens of a state. Tolerance necessarily takes on different forms in each of these institutional contexts. Here is where we see the relevance of Abraham Kuyper’s principle of sphere sovereignty or what James W. Skillen, Paul Marshall, and others have labeled *differentiated responsibility*.⁴ An understanding of this principle should enable us to see that tolerance of diversity is not simply a standard that operates across the broad range of human activities in vague, undifferentiated fashion. Indeed, within the context of the institutional church, tolerance, as such, is not an unquestioned virtue. We could scarcely expect a Jewish synagogue to embrace those confessing Jesus as Son of God or those believing Mohammed to be God’s prophet. Nor do we find it surprising that the Roman Catholic Church bypasses otherwise-qualified Presbyterians when it comes time to appoint its own bishops. A Christian Church unable, in the name of tolerance, to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian teachings will eventually cease to be Christian in any recognizable sense. In this respect, tolerance in the ecclesiastical realm is definitely and necessarily a limited tolerance. Such a limitation is intrinsic to the confessional character of the ecclesiastical community. As church members, therefore, the reality of religious diversity should prompt

us to marshal our efforts at evangelism by preaching the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.

However, outside of the institutional church and in our capacity as citizens, we can find ample reason for tolerating a larger measure of religious diversity than would be fitting within the ecclesiastical setting itself. To begin with, as Dulles points out, God is patient with unbelief in this present age prior to the Last Judgment. This is implied in the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24–30), in which the farmer delays uprooting the tares, or weeds, from among the good grain until the harvest. Some measure of tolerance is also entailed in a refusal to attach eschatological pretensions to the State's task of maintaining justice. Here is where we begin to touch on the differentiated responsibility of distinct human communities. Government possesses a certain limited, delegated authority from God, but it hardly possesses the whole of this authority. In other words, the State is not God. It can neither save nor damn. Nor can it establish a final condition of perfect justice short of the return of Christ. Only God through his Son can do that.

In other words, the State is simply different from the institutional church and must function according to norms appropriate to its own nature. A central task of the institutional church is to maintain the confessional integrity of the believing community by exercising discipline over its members. By contrast, the central task of the State is to do justice to all individuals and communities residing within its territorial jurisdiction. This means, along Kuyperian lines, that the State must respect the diverse callings of the broad range of non-State communities, as well as of the unique, individual persons who function in all of these contexts, including the State. This range of non-State activity is often collectively labeled *civil society*, *civil associations*, *mediating structures*, or *intermediary institutions*.⁵ This is the structural element of the State's task.

But the State also has an obligation in this present fallen world to protect the diversity of religious worldviews and to treat them in equitable fashion. This necessarily entails the protection of religious liberty, as Dulles rightly points out. This means, *inter alia*, that governments must offer equal protection to schools representing a variety of worldviews, whether they are Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or secular. Such equal protection need not assume, in relativistic fashion, that Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and secular humanism are all equally true, which, as noted above, is a logical impossibility. It does assume, on the other hand, that the State does not possess the institutional competence to judge among alternative religious truth claims. To be sure, the various governmental officials wielding political authority are themselves Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and secular humanists. These officials

do not forget or artificially bracket their religious commitments when they enter public life, as the aforementioned liberal approaches assume. In fact, one can expect their commitments to infuse and condition the ways they carry out their public duties, yet they are also cognizant that the unique task of the State to do justice is not the same as the evangelical task of the institutional church. *Each has a distinct responsibility to fulfill in God's world, and these ought not to be confused.*⁶ In particular, the State's tolerance of religious diversity must not attempt to abrogate what may appear to many as the "intolerance" of the particular faith communities themselves. In other words, Catholics should be allowed to be Catholics, and Jews should be allowed to be Jews.

The Demise of a Civil Religion and Hope for the Future

To say that the State must protect religious liberty and refrain from usurping the institutional church's confessional task is not to say that the State can function apart from foundational religious assumptions of its own, nor can the State do its job smoothly if these assumptions are not in some measure shared by the broad community of citizens. At the very least, this underscores the significance of political culture, which is the complex of attitudes people have toward their political leaders and institutions as well as to their own civic responsibilities.⁷ The role of political culture becomes particularly evident when a formal constitutional framework that has worked well in one setting is unsuccessfully transplanted into another lacking similar supportive traditions. Walter Lippmann speaks in this context of a public philosophy rooted in traditions of civility shared by the political community at large.⁸ This is perhaps comparable to what Dulles and others refer to as a *civil religion*. Dulles regrets the erosion of this "national consensus" offering "a broad umbrella for religious diversity." Without confidence in the truths of "natural and revealed religion," it becomes increasingly difficult to justify legal prohibitions of abortion, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide, all of which come to be viewed as little more than matters of individual choice.

Dulles ends his remarks on a somewhat bleak note by observing that a skeptical relativism threatens freedom and religion alike. Although he is right to raise this warning, I suggest that there is reason for hope in (1) what Kuyper refers to as the *common grace of God*, which preserves the world in the midst of human sin; (2) the redoubled efforts of Christians both to spread the Gospel and to influence the policy process, as in, for example, the enactment of char-

itable choice legislation by the United States Congress; (3) the increasing general appreciation of the importance of civil society after the fall of communism; and (4) the enlarged recognition by Christians that the future of their religion's public witness is not dependent on its fate in any one country.

These realities imply the following for the future of Christian action in God's world: First, much as we might value or regret the loss of a national public consensus concerning the worth of human life, the nature and limits of politics, and our obligations to each other and to God, the cultivation or revitalization of such a consensus is not something that can be wholly addressed by political means, except insofar as we have the opportunity, as citizens of a democratic polity, to elect officeholders in sympathy with our own world-views. For the most part, however, such seemingly modest endeavors as spreading the Gospel and raising godly families are likely to bear more fruit over the long term.

Second, we should not attempt simply to revive a fading consensus, which would be an antihistorical effort and thus certainly doomed to failure. We must tailor our efforts to the unique circumstances of the present, understanding where people are now, and looking always to the future, confident of God's guidance and the empowering strength of his Spirit. We cannot forget, for example, that the old consensus contained much that we now properly find reprehensible, such as the general belief in racial superiority undergirding colonialism and segregation, which was frequently justified in overtly Christian terms. This is not to say that the consensus could be fairly defined as wholly racist or sexist in the current reductionist fashion. The reality was more complex than this. Yet it *is* to say that we cannot go about our task in a conservative way, as if the past were not a mixture of both good and evil.

Third, we must avoid concluding from the decline of a consensus in our own political community that the future of God's kingdom on earth is thereby imperiled. Much as the early Irish monks of the sixth and seventh centuries came from the periphery of Europe and successfully reevangelized a continent still reeling from the collapse of the *pax Romana*, we may yet see Western Christianity reinvigorated from without, as Korean, Chinese, African, Latin American, and Filipino Christians bear fresh witness to us of God's grace. In the meantime—that is, prior to the Second Advent of Christ—religious diversity will remain a fact of life with which we must simply live, as we have done for centuries. The best way to do this is to bear in mind the distinct characteristics of the State and the institutional church, as well as to understand the different forms that tolerance takes within each.

Notes

1. John S. Mill, *On Liberty*, chap. 2, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion” (1859, reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948).
2. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984).
3. A significant Roman Catholic alternative to Murray is persuasively articulated by David L. Schindler, who argues that the nonconfessional liberal State is in reality infused with a confessional ethos, the logic of which, effectively privatizes traditional religious commitments. Schindler’s *communio* ecclesiology, which he offers as a way to cut through the dilemma between the preconciliar Catholic integralism and postconciliar Catholic liberalism, bears a striking resemblance to a Kuyperian position. See David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996).
4. To understand better the meaning and implications of differentiated responsibility, see James W. Skillen, *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), and *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994); and Paul Marshall, “Politics Not Ethics: A Christian Perspective on the State,” in *Servant or Tyrant: The Task and Limits of Government* (Mississauga, Ontario: Christian Labor Association of Canada and Work Research Foundation, 1989), 5–24.
5. See, for example, Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1977). Tocqueville refers to these phenomena as *civil associations* (*Democracy in America*, 2:5), while Jean Bethke Elshtain uses what is now the more familiar expression, *civil society*. Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books/HarperCollins, 1995), 5ff. This term has come into currency particularly since the collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc.
6. Kuyper makes a further distinction between the Church as *institute* and the Church as *organism*, which roughly corresponds to that between the Church as manifested in congregational and denominational organizations and the Church as *corpus Christi*—the body of Christ. The latter is capable of being manifested in a variety of institutional settings, including but not limited to, the former. See Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1931), 59ff; and Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 132ff. My own concept of a political approach to religious tolerance follows in this tradition and is not

intended to imply a dualistic two-kingdoms approach that excludes religion from the political realm.

7. For classic studies of political culture, see Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), and *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980).
8. Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy* (New York: New American Library, 1955).