



**Contentions over the Public Space:
Reconsidering Religious and Secular Voices for Peace and Justice**

Daniel Oduro Sem

Theology Department, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada

Abstract

While religious and ethnic conflicts usually occur over issues such as subjugation, power imbalance, land litigation, etc., modern conflicts - be it political or social - tend to be struggles over recognition, accessibility to the common good, and human rights issues. Against this background, conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in traditional societies with people of common religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic interests can be suppressed more than in a state where there is a lack of religious and ethnic homogeneity. The governments of pluralist states play a key role in addressing economic, political and social inequalities. Modern states, therefore, need to conceptualize a public space that is able to confront the challenges of pluralism and diversity in their conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The pertinent question is: in an advanced postmodern world, what should influence political leaders' decision-making on public issues that affect pluralist cultures? In responding to this question, this paper critically examines the contributions of Judeo-Christian philosophers and secular political liberals to the debate on the separation between church and state, and highlights the important aspects of their arguments that can help create a public space needed to foster peace and justice in contemporary pluralist states. I argue that even though contemporary societies are characterized by pluralism, differing ideologies, diverse beliefs, values, and different religious convictions, citizens and political leaders may draw lessons from the skill set and intervention strategies rooted in both secular and Judeo-Christian religious thought, which include negotiation, empathy, recognition, acceptance and respect for the *other*.

Keywords: church, state, pluralism, public space, liberalism, peace, justice

Introduction

An attempt to set limits on religion and politics in pluralist states is an old time contested debate. Two main renowned contributors to the debate are Judeo-Christian thinkers on the one hand, and secularist political theorists on the other. Since they both raise some important issues that can help reconstruct the public space in a pluralist society, we cannot overlook the two voices in our efforts toward peacebuilding. As an ally to the liberal paradigm and as an insider of religious faith, my aim is not to attack any individuals/groups, but to do introspection and reflect on my own faith as well as my political ideology.

I thought that liberalism is supposed to tolerate minority groups in a democratic state, and religious people are also called to love, care and empathize with others. Ironically, neither political liberals nor scholars within the religious tradition have embraced the *other* wholeheartedly. Neither of the two schools of thought has actively included the voices of traditional rulers and indigenous leaders in the public space debate. By this oversight, both two sides of the debate seem to ignore the potential role of traditional rulers in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This oversight is perhaps due to the fact that the discussion on the contention over the public square takes place through vigorous academic research, and it appears that only those who get heard are the scholars whose academic training and credentials enable them to articulate their ideas convincingly.

For decades now, both Judeo-Christian religious thought and liberal paradigms have persisted side by side to influence each other on public policies in the West. Some political liberals maintain that religious justification for public policy is unfair to nonbelievers (Dworkin, 1995; Rorty, 2003). This seems to suggest that not all religious views can respond adequately to the needs of pluralist societies. Some religious scholars also think that secularist political ideologies are not helpful because of their overemphasis on neutrality and centrality on individualism (Chaplin, 2006; Goudzwaard, 1979). Despite these contested views, principles of social justice and fairness seem to be the major concern of both traditions. Hence, a consideration to these two schools of thought can foster the formulation of some humanitarian and egalitarian ideals needed to promote peace and justice. It is therefore important to reconsider the two views for the protection and preservation of public space needed to prevent the marginalization of minorities and the insensitivity of dominant groups to the needs of the *other*.

Minority groups in this study refers to marginalized, powerless and voiceless groups in modern states who are disadvantaged because of their social or political location. They are in the blind spot of the powerful and influential leaders as they suffer systemic racism, discrimination and/or oppression at different levels. They include people of color, women, people with disability, LGBTQ2S population, religious minorities, etc. Since traditional rulers and indigenous leaders are excluded from the public space in spite of their wisdom in dispute mediation and prevention; they too may fit in the category of minority groups in the political arena. Justice is thought of as fairness that needs to occur in the process of distributive, procedural and corrective measures. There is no better way to understand peace than what Albert Einstein wrote centuries ago - *Peace is not just the absence of war but the presence of justice, of law, of order by the government*. Peace and justice are thus inseparable concepts for social, political and economic prosperity for every nation. Peace is not an economic product but it can be very scarce (Sem, 2006). Thus, to achieve and maintain peace and justice, modern states need to theorize a framework with principles emerging from the public space debate as discussed by both religious and liberal scholars.

The formulation of such theoretical framework could help one analyze the factors that underpin political leaders' decision on public issues in pluralist cultures.

The Public Space

The public space/square in a democratic state is the common space where fundamental matters of public interest are deliberated upon. However, if the public space in a pluralist society can be viewed as the arena where citizens (regardless of their sex, gender, language, religion, race, and cultural orientation) endlessly contend for power and recognition, then it can also be likened to the "social arena" defined by Nancy Fraser (1987) as the arena in which diverse groups, movements, and experts negotiate their rights and needs with policy makers. From Fraser's (1987) framework, the public space may be described as "a new terrain of wider political contestation" (p. 157).

In this context, when political theorists and philosophers contemplate what should characterize the public space in a pluralist democratic state, it may be understood as another way of raising concerns about justice and fairness in such a pluralist community. Thus, questions about the legitimacy of acting or speaking in a particular manner, as politicians or public servants, are other ways of probing the relationship between a person's deep convictions and the policies s/he favors in decision making process, and how that decision affects those who do not share a similar conviction. These convictions of leaders and politicians may either be influenced by religious beliefs or a particular form of philosophical doctrine. And there are different kinds of such doctrines, especially in a pluralistic community - doctrines which John Rawls (1996) refers to as "comprehensive doctrines." Policies on abortion, war, taxes, weapons, death penalty, marriage, divorce, substance use, sexuality, and many others, are contested over in the public space. And what the law says about these issues are also shaped by politicians' idiosyncrasies and their cherished values.

The Endless Church/State Contention over the Public Space

Policies and laws passed by the legislature are sometimes (if not always) influenced by one belief or another. So the key question surrounding the contention over the public space in a pluralistic society is whether or not diversity and pluralism count when it comes to issues about the public square. In order to promote peace, justice and fairness, what criteria do we need when making decision on public policies as citizens in pluralist cultures? It will be gross underestimation to suppose that pluralist states will be void of contention over comprehensive doctrines just because of the existence of constitutional arrangements clearly delineating the limits of the church and the state. What we read in the history of political theory actually presents the opposite.

Historically, the development process of the conflict between church and state in North America and Europe has been cyclical. As Milton Konvitz (1968) observed about the United States, one reason that accounts for such an endless debate about the church and state is because "Americans are constantly changing their views about the proper province of the state" (p. vii). Konvitz (1968) further points out that the clash between church and state is attributable to the people's radical change of interest in, and actions, toward religion. Because Americans are always changing their views about religion, Konvitz (1968) concludes: "churches [including] organized religions of all denominations and sects—today do

things that were unthinkable a very short time ago” (p. viii). In a recent political debate in Canada, Toronto’s City Counselor, Giorgio Mammolity, perceived a close connection between religion and politics and tweeted: the “lack of religious values in politics is why our children are killing each other” (Breen, 2018).

The cause of the changes in opinions about the realm of religion and politics is not a primary concern here, but it can be surmised that the challenges resulting from the diversity of cultures and emergence of different philosophical doctrines do account for people’s constant change of mind about the church-state debate. Pluralism and diversity are part of nature, yet it can disturb the peace process in democratic cultures if not handled with care. The swift change of views about the province of church and state is gradually diminishing respect for human life. We have replaced our communitarian virtues with capitalism. Capitalism has its own benefits, but it has also made us more individualistic, and we are prone to pursue our self-interests while failing to consider the suffering of others. Proliferation of arms across the globe has increased wealth among some nations, but it has also fueled explosion of violent conflicts among other nations and ethnic groups in our world. Serious war crimes are also committed in the name of the so-called *just war*.

Konvitz’s (1968) observation of the church-state contention sheds some light on the work of Monsma and Soper (1998), which evaluates the interpretation of the establishment-clause in America. Among other factors, Monsma and Soper published their book, *Equal Treatment* (1998), in response to the “increasing religious pluralism of the United States [and] the rise of the comprehensive administrative state” (p. 3). Monsma and Soper (1998) note that the state now provides some social services and enforces policies, which were previously taken care of by the church and other social organizations. This includes welfare services such as counseling, treatment for drug dependency, spousal-abuse programs, etc. Given that the state is also involved in delivering services similar to that of the church, it will be unfair for the state to sponsor secular organizations delivering those services and ignore financial support for religious social service organizations which play similar roles. The dilemma here is that since secular institutions adhere to the separation between church and state, it is hard to determine whether religious social service providers will also be required to apply the “strict separationist” principles complied by the non-religious and secular social agencies. According to Monsma and Soper (1998), *strict separationism* may be explained as a strong rejection of any close relationship between the church and state. Strict separationists see the two institutions as diametrically opposed to each other. Should religious organizations solicit state funds and agree to the liberal state’s neutral principle or not? Religious institutions are mandated to promote peace and justice and to show love and compassion to all humanity. But responding to the needs of diversity and pluralist cultures in multicultural environment is not easy either, for this may have severe consequences on the shared identity of religious people amidst the rising process of secularization. Thus, the shifting boundaries of the church and state and the people’s constant change of mind about the two institutions seem to have several implications including the identity of traditional communities for future generations.

Traditional communities and cultural groups may face serious threat under conditions where their roles overlap with the state in the distribution of the public good in a pluralist society. This should explain one of the main reasons why both Christian political theorists and secularist liberals attempt to define the criteria for public policy in pluralist cultures. Therefore, a systematic overview of Christians’ and secular liberals’ favored policies need to be examined as well as the principles upon which such justifications are grounded.

Religion, the Conversation Starter among Deferring Groups

Although Rorty (1994) perceives religion as a *conversation stopper*, one may designate religion as a conversation starter to account for the beginning of the contention over the public space. History of politics begins with *Theocracy*. Even during the monarchical era in Judeo-Christian literature, God was still active in the election of kings. The 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment brought a change. The Enlightenment did not only revolutionized the world through scientific method of inquiry and logical reasoning, it also empowered humans to investigate nature and question religious dogma. Sacred writings published in modern languages increased accessibility to Holy Books in public libraries. Nature was no more unknowable or unquestionable. This accelerated the process of secularization in both private and public lives. The separation between church and state affected people with deep religious conviction. Consequently, some religious believers reacted by favoring public policies as informed by their sacred writings. While officials might not be able to hide their deep religious conviction on public matters, it is equally important to reflect on how their decision on public issues affect pluralist cultures in a state where priority is placed on the promotion of peace and justice.

Machen's (1978) discussion of Christian decisions on public policy, dubbed *Christian establishment*, is a thought provoking one. It is a direct response to America's diverse kinds of plurality which emerged in the 1960s – including ethical and philosophical doctrines, which did not always recognize tradition and scripture as the final authority regarding issues of public concern. Examples of these doctrines are normative ethical theories such as utilitarianism, egoism, deontology, etc. Secularist liberals seriously take into account the importance of such ethical theories whenever they engage in conversation with religious people on matters about public policy. However, because secularist liberals sometimes overstate their claims, and because decision on public policy without specific reference to one's deep conviction appears unfair to religious people, religious believers such as Machen rejects any source of morality outside religion. Among fundamentals and some evangelicals, it appears that religion is not ready yet to negotiate its boundaries. For instance, in decision-making process - whether a policy concerns an individual, the church or the community, Machen (1978) reminds Christians:

I have already said what our standard is. It is the Bible. When we are deciding whether we can support any propaganda or engage in any course of conduct, we simply ask whether that propaganda or that course of conduct agrees with the Bible. (p.76)

Though Machen (1978) is not specifically addressing the public space, it can be surmised that his emphasis is placed on the authority of the Bible. Freedom of religion allows religious devotees to express their religious faith without threat or any form of coercion. However, given the contemporary debate on the relationship between one's religious faith and their favored law or public policy (Eberle, 2002; Stout, 2004), it is not an overestimation to contend that Machen (1978) would also reject any public policy that is not consistent with the Christian Bible. Both Stout (2004) and Eberle (2002) concede that religious people could and should support public policies based on their religion, but none of them endorses the radical position of Machen (1978), which centers solely on the Bible. Machen (1978) is even unwilling to accommodate other Christians who might attempt different interpretation of the Bible other than his. Thus he goes on to argue:

[W]e refuse to make mere rapidity of growth or enthusiasm of adherents

the criterion by which any religious movement shall be judged. Instead, we test every movement by the Bible. If it agrees with the Bible, we approve it; if it disagrees with the Bible, we oppose it, no matter what external successes it may attain and no matter even what apparent graces it may seem to our superficial human judgment to induce here and there in its adherents. (p.76)

The belief that Christians could shape public policy (and for that matter the public space) according to the Bible alone, is contested. Machen's (1978) position is thus very crucial to our discussion because first, it may pose a serious political problem in contemporary pluralist society; and second, it seems to problematize religious pluralism as well. In the first instance, Machen (1978) seems to fail to recognize the need to consider other cultures in a pluralist community on public issues. The idea also seems to disregard the presence of other religious groups such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and many others. More specifically, one may infer from this assertion that Machen (1978) grossly denies the importance of other Christian groups whose religious conviction (as a result of their commitment to public justice) is different from his. There are Christians whose passion and commitment to public justice seem to motivate them to accept certain degree of diversity and difference. For this reason, even secularist philosophers such as Rorty (2003) "see liberal Protestantism as the form of Christian religious life most congenial to a liberal democracy" (p. 148).

The belief that the Bible must serve a reference point in all matters including politics rhymes with the *National Confessional* position strongly held by Edgar (1989). Like Machen (1978), Edgar (1989) argues that because western culture throughout history has acknowledged the power and authority of Jesus over and above kings, nations, and churches; and because the West had "owed a great deal to the Bible, both in its conception of law and in particular instances of law" (p. 180), America must now turn the nation back to its roots to allow God's rule, for historically, governments did not make laws, they only applied the laws given by God (p. 180).

Indeed, there are potential ideals and moral prospects that societies may enjoy by surrendering their nations under the rule of God. But as Smith (1989) points out, "scriptural, historical, and practical arguments indicate that [such a proposal] is undesirable [because it] causes division among theists and diverts attention from other more important tasks" (p. 213). Besides Smith's (1989) significant comment, it is also clear that Machen's (1978) and Edgar's (1989) position seems to reflect (un)conscious misrecognition of cultural diversity in a pluralist society - an important component of pluralist politics, which Mouw and Griffioen (1994) have carefully expounded in Christian public philosophy and which remains significant for both political theorists and peace and justice advocates.

The Concept and Types of Plurality

Mouw and Griffioen (1994) identify three types of pluralities in societies - directional, associational, and contextual pluralities. Directional plurality refers to a plurality of belief systems or worldviews that shape the direction and lifestyle of a people. Associational plurality refers to groups and basic social units such as the family, occupational and educational institutions that constitute a given community. Though the family is one of such associations, the authors distinguish it from mere social club and other corporations. Chaplin (2006) also makes an important observation that since the

term “association” covers involuntary institutions such as kinship and political structures, it is more appropriate to use the term “structural” for associational plurality (p. 146). The third group of plurality is a kind, which Machen (1978) and Edgar (1989) would probably not recognize at all - i.e., contextual pluralism. This is a pluralism explained by the visible presence of other different religious, ethnic, class, gender, and racial groups.

In addition to the typology of pluralities, Mouw and Griffioen (1994) also draw a distinction between *descriptive* and *normative* senses of plurality, for they believe that it is one thing to acknowledge the existence of pluralities and it is another thing to accept it as the way things ought to be. Thus, because Mouw and Griffioen (1994) are particularly concerned with public pluralism that can foster the ordering of public life, they recognize and acknowledge pluralism in a descriptive sense while rejecting normative sense of pluralism. This is because according to their belief, normative directional pluralism leads to ultimate relativism. Nonetheless, although Mouw and Griffioen (1994) reject normative directional pluralism, the significant point is that they “set forth some Christian reasons for treating associational and cultural diversity as good states of affairs” (p. 18). This recognition is what seems to be in direct conflict with the view held by Machen (1978) and his allies.

Now assuming the Christian religious tradition is the only religious group in a given political community, Machen’s (1978) remark will still appear contentious since Christian religious groups do not necessarily share similar interpretations, though they seem to uphold common sacred writings. The validity of the Bible as the sole criterion for public policy in a multicultural and pluralistic state has, thus, been reconsidered both by secularist liberals as well as other Christian political theorists. In what follows, let’s examine the response by secularist liberals.

Secularist Liberals on Religion in the Public Space

Rorty (2003), who questions religious reasons in public life, initially urged that religious people should bracket out their beliefs when engaging in political issues or public discussion. However, due to his critics’ remarks, Rorty came to admit the weaknesses of his assumption on the topic. Hence he later reviewed his position on the issue of religion and politics. But to what extent does the revision reflect a change in Rorty’s (2003) views about the topic? In content, Rorty does not seem to be saying anything different compared to his original position. Even though he tries to isolate pastors who minister to members of the church from ecclesiastical organizations in order to clarify his anti-clerical views, yet in his so-called *Reconsideration of Religion in the Public Square*, Rorty (2003) still declares:

We secularists have come to think that the best society would be one in which political action conducted in the name of religious belief is treated as a ladder up which our ancestors climbed, but one that now should be thrown away. (p. 142)

This perspective does not seem to permit religious reasons in political debate, for according to the above it is a thing of the past. While one may disagree with Rorty (2003) on this point, his notion of the Bible and public debate in a pluralist state is very compelling. For instance, he argues that one might not be legally prohibited from citing a Bible passage such as Psalm 72 to endorse redistributionist social legislation for the sake of the poor or Leviticus 18:22 to delegitimize same-sex marriage in public discussion. For Rorty (2003), doing that is “not just in bad taste, but as heartlessly cruel, as reckless persecution, as incitement to violence” (p. 143).

Dworkin (1985) and Rawls (1997) shared a similar belief of Rorty (2003) in their view of a pluralist liberal democratic state. Rawls (1997) taught that the essential feature of democracy is *reasonable pluralism*, hence any concept of justice in such a pluralist community must be tied with the principle of equality and fairness. His particular concern is that because political decisions enacted in law requires adherence, free citizens with equal dignity must be offered reasons why they must accept a given policy as legitimate. Under conditions of ‘reasonable pluralism’, public officials cannot be committed to a particular conception of the good - they must be neutral because of their position. Among other grounds, Rawls (1997) has been criticized for defending equality, an abstract and unrealistic concept of justice. But his theory is not inconsistent with the assumptions underlying Dworkin’s (1985) idea of the good and the role of government. For Dworkin (1985), the reason an official should not hold fast to a particular conception of the good life in the public square is this:

since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions, the government does not treat them [as] equals if it prefers one conception to another either because the officials believe that one is intrinsically superior, or because one is held by the more numerous or more powerful group. (p. 191)

As far as equality, justice and fairness are concerned, Rawlsian political liberalism seems to differ slightly from Dworkin partly due to the exceptions the former makes when he critiques the threats of religion to liberal democracy. For Rawls (1997), politically unreasonable doctrines which repudiate the idea of public reason and challenge democratic institutions are only the “fundamentalist religious doctrines and autocratic and dictatorial [regimes]” (p. 613).

While ‘fundamentalist doctrines’ and ‘autocratic regimes’ may threaten our effort toward peacebuilding in pluralist societies, they are not prevalent among only religious groups. Some versions of secularist liberalism - the kind that have always sought for the complete overthrow of traditional communities may also appear radical and sometimes illiberal to believers whose religious convictions are mostly totally at odds with that of the secularist liberals.

Stephen Macedo (1998) represents the secularist liberal ideology that poses a threat to the creation of a public space needed to promote peace and justice in pluralist cultures. In his *Transformative Constitutionalism*, Macedo (1998) echoes John Locke and emphasizes a clear-cut “segmentation” or “compartmentalization” between religion and political life. Macedo (1998) critiques the traditional school system because he argues it pays too much attention to religion.

Religion and politics are not bedfellows for most secularist liberals. In this light, Macedo’s (1998) theory of diversity gives room for religion in private matters, but not in politics. For instance, he celebrates the American public rituals undertaken by judges and presidential candidates during which they are compelled to make public confessions that are not usually consistent with their faith. And Macedo (1998) sees these confessions as an expression of Americans’ “commitment to ensuring that political power will be exercised on grounds of reasons that [Americans] share, and for purposes [Americans] can hold and justify in common” (p. 69). Macedo’s (1998) hope is that these public rituals will “diminish the importance of some religious convictions in people’s lives” (p. 69). Moreover, in an effort to strengthen liberal institutions and build roadblocks against religion, the goal of radical secularists’ agenda toward religious voices in the public realm is thus clearly outlined by Macedo (1998):

We should, therefore, preserve liberal institutions, practices, rituals, and norms that psychologically tax people unequally, for if that has the

effect of turning people's lives - including their most "private" beliefs - in directions that are congruent with and supportive of liberalism, thank goodness it does. This is what "Transformative Constitutionalism" is all about. (p. 72)

Of course, religious people cannot coerce a person to accept certain principles on the grounds that one does not share in the absence of faith. But to pursue a project that seeks to diminish religious conviction among believers is equally unwarranted, especially if such religious convictions are the kind that can promote peace and justice.

The advocates of religious establishment create problem for authentic pluralist theory. But some liberals' sharp dichotomy between religion and politics also needs to be reconsidered to address the illiberality of some secularist liberals. In a pluralist state, the acts of coercion and disrespect of other groups can best be described as the enemies of peace and justice, which political theorists should try to avoid in the pursuit of peacebuilding. Robust liberalism emphasizes public issues such as equal treatment, fairness, public democratic virtues and respect for all citizens (regardless of one's belief, gender, sexual orientation, color, or race). At a time when directional, associational, and contextual pluralities overwhelmingly characterize the polity, liberalism is not a panacea for the political and social malaise of great nations, but it needs to be acknowledged for its spirit of accommodation, which other directional or religious groups shaped by intolerant ideologies, are hesitant to embrace.

Some liberal democratic concepts, principles and values are attractive to minorities and marginalized groups. Indeed, because liberal democratic ethos seem to empower individual rights and foster group identities in multicultural polity, minority groups are likely to accept liberalism more than other ideologies. As David Novak (2004) rightly observes, "multiculturalism is for the sake of minority groups" (p. 57). Novak (2004), however, adds that it is rather unfortunate that modern arguments for social contract theory have been based not on Christian democratic tradition, but rather on secular foundations. In spite of its visible threats to traditional communities, some liberal ideals still remain attractive to marginalized groups. Thus if an objection is raised against Macedo (1998) and his defenders, it is not primarily because of liberalism's effort to diminish religious excesses in politics, rather, its secrete project aiming at the disappearance of religious and traditional communities in liberal democracy.

I am in search of principles and ideals that can promote peace and justice. Liberalism seems to provide some of these ideals. However, if Macedo's (1998) aim is what is described in his "Transformative Constitutionalism," then it is not an ideal type of vibrant liberalism required to harmonize multicultural groups for peace and justice, for it appears a deliberate project to subvert the presence of religious groups in liberal politics. Therefore, we need a perspective that resonates with the role of a pluralist state.

Judeo-Christian Response to Secularist Liberals on the Church-State Debate

One of the objections raised against the liberal concept of equality and neutrality in a pluralist state is that of the threat of disappearance of traditional communities. In his response to this supposition, Novak (2004) argues that it is detrimental for traditional cultures to live in societies where their identity is at risk, so it is time for one to look for a traditional justification that will ensure "a secular democratic order" (p. 54). The traditional justification according to Novak (2004) is the social contract theory, which serves as the main theoretical framework of his project. Social contract theory will help preserve

religious people because Novak maintains that entering into a social contract does not entail assimilation of an individual or their community. Chaplin (2006) also debunks liberal pluralism in favor of Christian pluralism because of the supposed abstraction nature of liberal equality. Walker (2000) also detests secular liberalism and maintains that because liberalism functions invisibly thereby making it difficult for cultural groups to resist, “secularist establishments are worse than overt religious establishment” (p. 113).

For the advocates of peace and justice, the crucial point is not which establishment is better and which one is worse. It is what set of principles may resonate with peace and justice; what role could an ideal state legitimately play in pluralist cultures; and how much respect do public officials owe to the diverse communities under their jurisdiction. An attempt to improve upon liberal neutrality and liberal equal opportunities for everyone is laudable, but to try to re-introduce Christian establishment or any ideology tantamount to liberal monism is equally dangerous, first, for non-Christian but religious communities, and second, for other secular directional groups.

On the Role of the State

A critical analysis of the contents of most of the Christian theories proposed in the religion and politics debate seem to shift too much responsibility to the state regarding how traditional cultural values can be preserved. However, a Christian theory of the state that can function to build a public space needed to promote peace and justice is far from the Christian establishment thesis. According to a Christian political thinker, Herman Dooyeweerd (1969), the state’s primary role is to promote justice. The state, thus, plays a very significant role in every society. This main function of the state in a pluralist society cannot be traded in for something else. Politicians may have their own beliefs and aspirations but their role in public justice may not be achieved if they primarily concern themselves with the preaching of doctrines at congress or if they focus on supporting policies that favor only Christians. As Dooyeweerd (1969) argues, “Neither internal ecclesiastical law, nor internal industrial law can have [the state’s] typical public juridical integrating function, however large the number of the members of a church or an industrial community may be” (p. 438). The state will cause more harm than good if it attempts to support and/or promote any given particular interest group at the expense of others whether directly or indirectly. A public space which enhances peace, justice and prosperity in pluralist cultures has a unique relationship with all other competing groups in that society. In their concept of pluralism, McCarthy, Oppewal, Peterson, and Spykman (1981) note that when competing social groups lobby and exert pressure on the government for their cause, the state acts “as an amoral power broker to maintain equilibrium among these many causes” (p. 31).

With such a vital role vested in the state, its officials should include leaders who have the skills and knowledge to mediate between conflicting groups and parties. We can’t turn our backs to the wisdom of traditional rulers and indigenous leaders at the time when officials of the state are confronted with disputes here and there. Peacebuilding efforts in contemporary pluralist cultures will be a mirage if we fail to integrate the wisdom of traditional rulers and indigenous leaders in mediation and conflict resolution. In the past, traditional leaders sustained peace, so they can be invited today to make contribution if we give them the opportunity and the necessary training required of our day.

The Importance of Traditional Rulers in Conflict Resolution

Growing up, I witnessed the socio-political influence of my grandmother, who was a Queen Mother in one of the villages in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Being a traditional ruler in a small community, the Queen acted as a link between the ancestors of the land and the living and she was seen as an icon of peace. As a traditional Queen Mother, she wielded socio-political power and her role distinguished her as a “queen in her own right” (Ephirim-Donkor, 2015, p. 237). Although she lived in a male dominating society, the strong matrilineal social structure of the Akan system of inheritance allowed the Queen to exercise reasonable amount of power and authority. This unique social influence enhanced the maintenance, management and promotion of peace in the community. Her power and influence made her successful in dispute resolution among individuals and groups under her jurisdiction. The conflicts she usually dealt with centered on social issues, including minor disagreements and misunderstanding among individuals and groups, marital issues, water access, right to land, etc. Like most African traditional rulers, the Queen made use of African norms, proverbs, values, songs and certain witty phrases common to the people in the community. She oftentimes made allusions to symbols in order to emphasize the importance of love, forgiveness and unity in the community. On several occasions, the Queen succeeded in bringing peace among opposing parties in the rural setting mainly because the people she ruled had shared values, similar religious and cultural worldview, common language and belief system.

But where is the power, influence, and the wisdom of traditional rulers today in the world poised with violent conflicts and the contentions over the public space? Several factors account for the diminished role of traditional rulers and the effectiveness of their approach to conflict management, resolution and prevention. *Indirect Rule* system introduced by the colonial masters usurped and/or redefined the powers of traditional rulers in Africa (Amoatia Ofori Panyin, 2010; Olusola & Aisha, 2013). *Westernism*, education and rural-urban migration also caused a rapid change in the people’s identity, culture and perception about life. Urban life gradually changed the people’s loyalty and allegiance to the traditional rulers. Western democracy, which was different from the traditional democratic system also contributed to the decline of the influence and power of traditional rulers. Though all these factors may account for the decline of the effectiveness of traditional rulers in conflict resolution, this paper emphasizes traditional rulers’ limited insight into the contemporary contested human rights issues and their incapacity to assume the main role of the state, as the main contributory factor for the decline.

Equipping Leaders for the Promotion of Peace and Justice

In spite of their success in community dispute resolution, traditional rulers may initially face a challenge in dealing with some of the human rights issues that characterize modern day conflicts if they are not trained and familiarized with the issues about the contentions over the public space. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in advanced pluralist democratic states are quite complex and differ in many significant ways from social and ethnic conflicts whose warlords usually had shared religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. The nature of contemporary conflicts calls for specialized skills and virtues not only for traditional rulers but for all state officials including Judeo-Christian and secularist political thinkers. Some of these virtues are already embedded in the arguments presented in the foregoing discussion. In entering a contested public arena, leaders’ primary concern should be on the

promotion of peace and justice rather than the preservation of their own cherished values though their deep convictions might influence their policies to some extent.

When the voiceless get heard and the destitute is fed; when the existence of minority groups and individuals are recognized and accepted as part of divine creation; when the wisdom of traditional rulers are acknowledged for peacebuilding process; when secularist liberals and Judeo-Christian thinkers come to agree that neither of them has all the answers to the needs of our contemporary pluralist democracy, it is an indication that our leaders are getting close to the call of justice in an unjust world. An election to political office comes with the responsibility of care, protection and security of a nation as well as of the vulnerable individuals and the manifold differing interest groups. Such a role cannot be accomplished by our traditional rulers and public officials if they lack enduring virtues such as love, empathy, acceptance, recognition and negotiation. These virtues are already rooted in Judeo-Christian thought and they do emerge when we deeply consider and respond to some of the tony questions raised by philosophers and liberal political thinkers about the contentions over the public space.

As conceptualized by Mouw and Griffioen (1994), descriptive sense of plurality allows leaders to acknowledge the presence of diverse cultures in a multicultural state. Though Mouw and Griffioen (1994) reject normative sense of diversity, it is time for religious devotees to reflect on the origin of diversity itself and to inquire about the expectations of their object of worship for the promotion of peace and justice. When religious people persistently labor for peacebuilding, justice and conflict resolution their commitment will shape and positively influence others including the secularist liberals. One is not oblivious of the fact that political ideology aimed at attacking major religious groups will have no room for traditionalists with native religious beliefs and practices no matter how useful their experience could make toward peace process. But there is no cause for alarm to involve traditional rulers in our commitment to peacebuilding as long as they are capable and comfortable to handle the challenges confronting modern states.

A new turn is taking place in some developing countries as traditional rulers attempt to prove their importance in state governance and peacebuilding. In entering the public space for equal recognition in Ghana, Amoatia Ofori Panyin (2010) is strongly convinced that “without the deep-rooted traditional values and norms of the collective nationalities, the Constitution alone would be unable to sustain the state” (p. 1). This can happen when state officials begin to acknowledge, respect and accept the worth of silent voices in the public realm.

Recognition may lead one to accept an individual or groups for their position if they prove themselves worthy of their demands. In this light, traditional rulers may be accepted into the public space as long as their wisdom and skills meet the demands of principles of peace and justice in pluralist cultures. Leaders or traditional rulers’ voices can get heard as they continuously update themselves to become more tolerant toward diversity and develop the skills of embracing cultural practices that are alien to their core values. Their active participation in governance at the local, municipal, and national levels cannot be attained if they are not recognized by state officials. Recognition complements acceptance, which begins by acknowledging the worth of an individual/group. This naturally evolve through the affection of love, care and empathy for the *other*. Genuine affection is a virtue given to human beings by the creator. Because the creator is love, empathetic and a great provider, the creator wants to see that in humanity as well. For instance, in teaching the Israelites how to empathize, God told the Israelites to be charitable to their neighbors because they were also strangers in a foreign land (Leviticus 19:34-35).

Empathy is one of the important tools we need in order to be able to demonstrate transparent love toward the less fortunate in our nations. It takes empathy for one to understand and feel for the difficult experiences which minority groups go through on a daily basis in our society - rejection, unemployment, oppression, widespread discrimination, poverty, institutionalization and prolonged incarceration by the criminal justice system. Love and empathy are bedfellows and one cannot express genuine love if they don't have empathetic skills. In her work, Karla McLaren (2013) defines empathy as "a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive perceptive, and appropriate communication and support" (p. 4). With their experience of deprivation, sufferings and isolation from the mainstream society in areas such as health, employment opportunities, education, etc., marginalized immigrants and minority groups also fit the designation of the *other*. Awareness of the visible presence of these minority groups in pluralist states and the offer of support to respond to their predicament is thus crucial in our peacebuilding efforts.

One also has to be conscious of the fact that the state cannot promote peace and justice effectively unless our chiefs and public officials who represent various cultural groups are prepared to negotiate some aspects of their cherished values and comprehensive doctrines when entering the public space, for the public space is a legal contested realm for all groups and individuals. By implication, a public official is to be committed to serving all citizens including their party opposition members; and traditional rulers, religious devotees as well as community leaders are also expected to serve everyone without discrimination. This is what liberalism connotes in pluralist democratic cultures and it is not inconsistent with what the Supreme Being also expects from religious believers.

What are the possible consequences when people with religious faith are asked to serve unbelievers indiscriminately when engaging with those who don't share their beliefs? Without doubt, this poses a threat to the unique identity of some key non-state institutions which have existed throughout ages. To preserve traditional community interest and values, public officials and traditional community leaders who are threatened by multiculturalism and diversity may have to use the technique of negotiation and active communication with their fellow citizens without manipulating state policies. Leaders who are committed to peaceful conflict resolution meticulously avoid coercion but would rather resort to dialogue/negotiation for their security, protection and continued survival. The survival of traditional communities largely depends on other factors including but not limited to 1) how a given traditional community members are able to engage in active communication with their interlocutors or the degree of tolerance and recognition of non-members of their valued tradition; 2) the willingness and the ability to re/structure the traditions within the framework of peace and justice; and 3) a critical appraisal of their past; and their passion to build structures that can foster social cohesion while maintaining an authentic cultural tradition for now and the future.

Conclusion

The contested human right issues that confront pluralist states nowadays make conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts more complex than the time when traditional rulers were effective in dispute resolution under their jurisdictions. The intersection between church and state and the boundaries of faith, religion and politics are at the core of liberal principles which have been responded to by both Judeo-Christian thinkers and religious fundamental traditionalists. If one rejects secular liberalism for its

secret plot aimed at rooting out the existence of religious devotees, then in the same token, one cannot tolerate public officials' effort to use political platform for the promotion of religious dogma. This is because the state's main function in pluralist democratic culture is to promote peace and justice for its citizens.

Public officials and leaders in great nations characterized by diversity of cultures, differing ideologies, beliefs and values, should continue to acquire and improve their conflict resolution skills to help them handle the contentions of our days by critically analyzing the arguments presented by both secular liberals and Judeo-Christian philosophers. Analysis of these two schools of thought raises the awareness that one of the ways by which we could promote peace, security and justice in an unjust world is by being mindful of the well-being, security and survival of the divine creatures, including the *other*.

References

- Amoatia Ofori Panyin, Osagyefo. (2010). Chiefs and traditional authorities and their role in the democratic order and governance. *The Institute of Economic Affairs Constitutional Review Series, 9*, 1-12. Retrieved from <http://ieagh.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/crs-9.pdf>
- Chaplin, J. (2006). Rejecting neutrality, respecting diversity: From "liberal pluralism" to "christian pluralism". *Christian Scholar's Review, 35*(2), 143-175. Retrieved from <http://www.csreview.org/>
- Dooyeweerd, H. (1969). *A new critique of theoretical thought* (3rd ed.). Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.
- Dworkin, R. (1985). *A matter of principle*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Eberle, C. J. (2002). *Religious conviction in liberal politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Edgar, W. (1989). The national confessional position. In G. S. Smith (Ed.), *God and politics: Four views on the reformation of civil government: theonomy, principled pluralism, Christian America, national confessionalism* (pp. 176-200). Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.
- Ephirim-Donkor, A. (2015). *The making of an african king: Patrilineal and matrilineal struggle among the awutu (effutu) of Ghana*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.
- Fraser, N. (1987). Women, welfare and the politics of need interpretation. *Hypatia, A Journal of Feminist Philosophy, 2*(1), 103-121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1987.tb00855.x>
- Goudzwaard, B. (1997). *Capitalism and progress: A diagnosis of western society*. England: Authentic Media.
- Konvitz, M. R. (1968). *Religious liberty and conscience: A constitutional inquiry*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Macedo, S. (1998). Transformative constitutionalism and the case of religion: Defending the moderate hegemony of liberalism. *Political Theory, 26*(1), 56-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591798026001004>

- Machen, G. J. (1978). *The christian faith in the modern world*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- McCarthy, R., Oppewal, D., Peterson, W., & Spykman, G. *Society, state, & schools: A case for structural and confessional pluralism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- McLaren, K. (2013). *The art of empathy: A complete guide to life's most essential skill*. Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True.
- Breen, K. (2018, September 17). Ricky Gervais weighs in on Toronto councillor's 'religion and politics DO MIX' tweet. *Global News*. Retrieved from <https://globalnews.ca/news/4457935/ricky-gervais-giorgio-mammoliti-devil-god-toronto/>
- Monsma, S. V., & Soper, J. C. (1998). *Equal treatment of religion in a pluralistic society*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Mouw, R., & Griffioen, S. (1994). *Pluralisms and horizons: An essay in christian public philosophy*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.
- Novak, D. (2004). Human dignity and the social contract. In D. Farrow (Ed.), *Recognizing religion in a secular society: Essays in pluralism, religion, and public policy* (pp. 51-68). Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1996). *Political liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rorty, R. (2003). Religion in the public square: A reconsideration. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 31(1), 141-149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9795.00127>
- Sem, D. O. (2006). Understanding peace: What peace is not. *First Light - A Biannual Publication of the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), Spring/Summer*, 26-29. Retrieved from <http://www.ccv.t.org/assets/ccvt-first-light-2006.pdf>
- Smith, G. S. (1989). The principled pluralist response to national confessionalism. In G. S. Smith (Ed.), *God and politics: Four views on the reformation of civil government* (pp. 213-220). Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.
- Stout, J. (2004). *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Walker, G. (2000). Illusory pluralism, inexorable establishment. In N. L. Rosenblum (Ed.), *Religious accommodation in pluralist democracies: Obligations of citizenship and demands of faith* (pp. 111- 123). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.