PUBLIC JUSTICE FOR ALL

AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE WORKS OF JAMES W. SKILLEN

1967-2021

Complied by

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Public Justice for All

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Compiled for www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk

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Introduction:

This brings together a listing of 512 items which represent a large portion of the work of Jim Skillen, the student, scholar, political scientist and expositor of Biblical teaching.

Thus this annotated bibliography\(^1\) begins at 1967 and lists Skillen’s publications up until 2021 and so supercedes previous listings that have since 2006 been located at the “All of Life Redeemed” web-site.

There is a significant group of articles not listed here and they are easy to identify. Among them are many of Skillen’s sharpest contributions. I am referring to his regular essays, on a variety of topics, for Public Justice Report, the publication of the Center for Public Justice. He was PJR’s editor and major contributor ever since its first edition. From 1977 until 1997, PJR was published 10 times per year, and at a conservative guesstimate there would be at least 2 Skillen contributions per issue. This would mean something like 400 more items to be included in any complete listing of his works. For PJR he also wrote the regular column, “The Testimony”, in which biblical texts were expounded and decisive biblical teaching about governance and justice explained. Some of these have already been collected together in A Covenant to Keep: Meditations on the Biblical Theme of Justice (2000) (see No.294).

As readers peruse this listing, they will discover the occasional reference to a bi-weekly broadsheet Capital Commentary that was sent out from CPJ in Washington DC. Only a selection of these op-ed pieces are included in the listing but there is an archive available from the CPJ website of items that go all the way back to 1997. Skillen wrote many of these but as part of his work he encouraged others to formulate their op-ed pieces too.

The works listed here are all or most of Skillen’s major publications apart from those published in Public Justice Report and Capital Commentary. There were others series of short articles as well: Root and Branch and also Election

\(^1\) COMPILER’S NOTE TO READERS AND USERS OF THIS ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY: Please forward bibliographical data of items that have been overlooked, of typographical errors or mistakes in citations to the compiler Dr Bruce C Wearne: bcwearne51@bigpond.com. Thankyou.
Series. My educated guess would be that this bibliography represents about 2/3rds of all of his published writings, keeping in mind that no major theme from his total output is absent from the works cited here and this list includes his “major” publications. Skillen’s political philosophy and contribution to public policy is clearly on display in this listing which includes: longer works, books, chapters, journal articles and so forth. Many, or maybe most, of these works have been written as part of the research expected of him from the Center for Public Justice.

Here we suggest that the scholar who would use this list to investigate Skillen’s contribution should keep in mind the complex relationship between the writer and the Center. This annotated list is made available to assist those who would investigate Skillen’s contribution to political science and the Center’s contribution to public policy. The annotations provide a descriptive commentary that, if taken together, can give an indication of how Skillen’s theoretical perspective has sharpened the Center’s public policies and civic education. So there is Skillen’s contribution to political science and there is also the contribution of the Center to public debate and public policy research. These are two facets of this bibliography which cannot easily be separated, although they need to be properly distinguished. Clearly the Center has provided Skillen with a context in which he has been encouraged to creatively unfold his political theory. He has done so in a way that is not only comprehensive and detailed in a scientific sense but his work has also been fruitful in its contribution to public policy debate and promoting public justice. This important nexus will have to be explored in greater depth by those taking up this challenging work to develop it further.

It is almost superfluous to say that we are dealing here with a writer who has published an enormous amount of material. And there may be important facets of Skillen’s contribution that only come to light after a close and critical examination of his “in-house” Center for Public Justice publications. But the researcher who peruses this bibliography will be introduced, without too much difficulty, to an adequate and representative sample of the Skillen output in all of its modes: theoretical, educative, public policy and belles lettres. These are his major publications, and so this listing deals with analysis and commentary that has been written to extend the work within, but also beyond, CPJ’s support base.

At this point it may be useful to sketch how Skillen stands in relation to many and varied strands of American evangelical Christianity. He was born in 1944. He was a student of Wheaton College (1962-66) before he went on to Westminster Theological Seminary (1967-69). Graduate study in philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam (1969-70) followed, and on
return to the United States he completed Masters and Doctoral programmes at Duke University, to be granted the PhD in political science in 1974.

Wheaton College was a centre of evangelical education. When Skillen was a Wheaton undergraduate the perspectives of Francis Schaeffer and John Howard Yoder were beginning to make a profound impact upon evangelical reflection, and the rising generation of evangelical leadership. By turning the attention of evangelicals to politics and culture, Schaeffer and Yoder counterbalanced the regnant evangelical view of Carl F H Henry that had prevailed since his 1947 publication *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Arthur Holmes was Skillen’s philosophy teacher. At Westminster, Skillen was encouraged by Robert Knudsen to extend his studies of the Kuyperian neo-Calvinist tradition and in particular of the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd. This was to continue with his Free University studies. And then, when he returned to the United States, he enrolled as a higher degree candidate at Duke University, where the highly respected Christian political scientist, John Hallowell, would become his supervisor.

If we consider Skillen’s evangelical background we find that when he was born in Colorado, his parents were employed as home missionaries with the American Baptists. He has recalled how, as a youngster, he was drawn without church or family pressure to profess his faith in Christ. As he matured, presbyterian and reformed influences from his Scots-Irish ancestry seem to have taken on greater significance. In 1966 he married Doreen whose family were involved in the Brethren in Christ, the denomination that supports Messiah College. He was to work as an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Messiah from 1973-75.

From this brief biographical sketch we might surmise that we are dealing with an American Christian who has had to find his own place midstream, with many diverging and converging currents. And from the annotated bibliography it will become clear that Skillen has maintained a scholarly dialogue with thinkers from a variety of evangelical traditions. The annotations will show, again and again, how Skillen has set himself to work with, and not simply against, the various strands, the warp and the woof, of American evangelicalism. Beyond that, the bibliography also shows a concerted effort to reach out further to other currents in American Christianity. So in this respect it is a record of a biblically-grounded ecumenical effort to remind Christians of their responsibility for public justice. There are reports of exchanges with many Christian scholars whose writings have a bearing upon political reflection. It will also be evident that Skillen has put a high priority upon keeping abreast of latest developments in anabaptist or “radical reformation” scholarship as variously expounded by
Ron Sider, John Howard Yoder, Jim Wallis and, more recently, Richard Hays

In his doctoral dissertation (see No. 12) Skillen laid the groundwork for his subsequent creative interaction with contemporary political thinkers, whether they be of Christian or humanist, of socialist, liberal or conservative persuasion. In that work he delved deeply into the history of western thought and presented a creative schematic overview of the historical unfolding of the relationship between Christianity and politics. His dissertation was titled *The Development of Calvinistic Political Theory in the Netherlands, with Special Reference to the Thought of Herman Dooyeweerd*. It traced the development of Dooyeweerd’s Christian political theory in detail and explored Dooyeweerd’s view of his philosophy’s historical background. By exploring reformational thinking in this way, Skillen not only presented a coherent explanation of how Calvinism responded to the legacy of Western Christendom but also of how neo-calvinism had begun to develop a critical orientation to the rise of modern humanism. On this foundation Skillen has formed his political theory, as well as becoming a leading interpreter of Dooyeweerd’s political philosophy (No.44, No.335, No.405, No.476, No.572). Just recently he has published an article on Dooyeweerd’s view of time that has obviously been percolating since he wrote his doctoral dissertation. That fact is indicative of Skillen’s efforts to take seriously his own education and learning.

This collection of political writings contains repeated discussion of the political significance of marriage and family life, of schools and farms, of military power and the marketplace, of welfare and religion, of national government and international law, of healthy communities and our bodies. It does so with a strong American emphasis, which is to be expected, but the overall value of this collection reaches beyond any provincial American application.

In brief then, we can say that these writings are also about the task of government in the political community (the state) which is, at root, but one way in which we as the human race respond to God’s generation to generation rule over all of our life. In that sense these writings are also about the task and responsibility of government, of citizens, in the context of all the responsibilities God has bequeathed upon the human race.

To repeat, politics is given to us so that we can look after our neighbours with justice. Politics is about the way a public legal order is established, maintained and developed by duly appointed magistrates, public officials and law enforcement agents. Human social life is diverse and the distinctive integrity of various human responsibilities, institutions and relationships, all
need to be respected and allowed to develop in their own way, according to their own character.

Skillen’s writings show us something of his diverse involvement in “politics”, as a political scientist, as a political educator, and as a director of a public policy research facility. Add that to his own responsibility as a citizen in his local neighbourhood, and we begin to sense something of the incredible complexity of the human vocation which, quite obviously, inspires him. It can be said that Jim Skillen seeks to do justice to this state of affairs in which human agents in societies like his own sometimes have a difficult job juggling all the different “hats” they are called upon to wear. He only occasionally refers to his family and married life, but when he does it is as if he has exegeted his domestic experience in order to learn more about his own limits on the domestic front, as well facing up to a freshly realized dimension of his own public involvement. And here we recall Skillen’s repeated statement that “public justice” is a God-given norm that if followed leads us on the path of blessedness. “Public justice” is nothing other than a calling, a path on which the human community is called to walk in humility.

If those advocating “public justice” begin to talk as if it is merely a brilliant idea, devised by an elite group of Christians, then they are in danger of having already turned down a dead end. Skillen has repeatedly warned against the impatience that breeds political idolatry, as if Christian citizens by means of their own collective moral power are called to set things right. Under such impatience, even if there are repeated appeals to “public justice”, the true significance of God’s norms for political life will have been lost. One might put all the efforts of one’s lifetime into setting up a thinktank that would grow a new elite of Christian “public intellectuals”, but to assume that norms only come into play when a majority of humans recognise them, or when certain language is formally attached to legislation, is to accept that a normative path is something we create for ourselves.

A normative path is what God creates; humans can only form their response along the path that lies before us. And indeed many seem to live as if public justice is merely the creature of a programme of social construction that has been undertaken by the “good guys”. Public justice is then twisted to become the historical “values” that have arisen from what our heroic ancestors (the ones we choose selectively to remember and honour) decide what “ought” to be. A critical analysis of Skillen’s writings on “public justice” will provide a well-developed refutation of, and perhaps also provide the ground-work for an equally critical and systematic confrontation with, the social constructionist dogma.
Public justice is a call to humility; it is integral to the calling of every citizen to pursue justice. And in that sense Jim Skillen’s writings are aimed not so much at the “man in the street” but to those who would serve their fellow citizens with public justice, in whatever domain that service be rendered. Public justice is a normative principle that binds citizens and government together in a political community with a task; the pursuit of public justice, the forming a just public-legal order, is that task. In that sense “public justice” can never become the possession or property of some or other professional elite. It is a path on which professions are called to serve their own communities and, more and more, their neighbours around the world. Political scientists, and all other scientific specialists in many and varied intellectual pursuits, have their own peculiar professional contributions to make which should also enhance public life and promote justice everywhere. But that also requires the development of a social concept that gives due regard to all of the diverse sciences and how they relate to the distinct social responsibilities that constitute our lives at home and abroad. And at that point we have come to the conclusion of our introduction.

Jim Skillen’s writings are part of his persistent pursuit of a renewed Christian contribution that challenges a political culture that has turned away from the Lord God. His writings are characterised by a consistent effort to avoid “skeptical negativism” (No. 39) by encouraging his readers to see their citizenship in global terms and as an integral facet of their service to God and neighbour.

Friday, 6 August 2021

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1967


This is Skillen’s first published piece. He was 23 at the time. It is an essay which systematically explores the philosophical anthropology of Karl Jaspers. It is evidence of the author’s desire to confront the philosophy of existentialism and in particular Jaspers’ philosophical concepts. Though critical, Skillen tries to make the most of what Jaspers has presented and concludes with a sketch of an alternative outline in which the Transcendent One is believed, in faith, to be the One who creates humanity as the image of Himself. In this context Skillen can thus problematise the tendency toward meaninglessness which Jaspers has tried to overcome via his philosophy. The essay indicates a determined effort to read Jaspers in order to benefit from what he has to say.

1969


The introduction to this brief article reads: “James W Skillen shows his familiarity with Dr Francis Schaeffer’s recent analyses on trends in modern thinking. Although written particularly with fellow students in mind, the article may help many readers to understand current attitudes among the young. More particularly, the article may enable those who have been troubled or shaken by modern thinking to see its root cause, while at the same time bringing them to a clearer understanding of the Christian faith”. In point of fact, Skillen in this article explains the logic of Hegel’s thesis-antithesis-synthesis relativism in a way that Schaeffer never seemed able to do in his writings. The article explains the contemporary “mind” and its problematic adherence to “synthesis” - an uneasy denial of the notion of truth as absolute - and Skillen does so from a Christian standpoint. The discussion uses sexual ethics for courtship as an example.


In this 6 page article, over one-and-a-half pages are devoted to references and notes. An examination of the 24 footnotes indicates that this article can also be approached as a “bibliographical essay.” It is constructed as a useful introduction to fellow students of literature pertinent to understanding Christian education. It focuses upon the way in which human identity is grasped in contemporary educational thought. It covers contemporary philosophy of religious education. Skillen positions his own Christian philosophical view of education within contemporary debates He was then a 25 year-old philosophy graduate from Wheaton College and a senior at Westminster Theological Seminary. This is the initial indication that he was reading and digesting “reformational literature”. The conclusion reads: The people of God must witness with new power from on high to the glorious grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and Christian education must take its place in that life-giving witness.

1971


This is a review of two books - Robert Farrar Capon The Supper of the Lamb 1970 and S U Zuidema De Christen en de Politiek n.d. The review article begins in this vein: Of course the governor has to eat, and the chef may remember to vote every few years, but really now, what in the world has cooking got to do with politics? This is a review by the doctoral candidate at Duke University studying political theory, comparative politics and international relations. It is
also evidence of Skillen the wit, Skillen the writer of humorous and perceptive belles lettres. The book reviews Capon’s view of culinary arts in the light of the Gospel message, as well as Zuidema’s book, in Dutch, about Christian political responsibility.

1972


This is a review essay in Vanguard’s “Explorations” department. The three books are David Green The Containment of Latin America: A History of the Myths and Realities of the Good Neighbour Policy (1971); R Harrison Wagner United States Policy Toward Latin America: A Study in Domestic and International Politics (1970); Jerome Levinson and Juan de Onis The Alliance that Lost its Way: A Critical Report on the Alliance for Progress (1970).

This is another publication of Skillen the doctoral student, time reviewing books that were part of his student reading in international relations. The focus is upon US policy with respect to Latin America, an initial exposition of the problematic that would be viewed in North-South terms.


https://mosaic.messiah.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3178&context=evanvisitor

The by-line to this article tells us that it was anticipated that Skillen would soon join the Faculty of Messiah College. The Evangelical Visitor is the magazine of the Brethren in Christ Church, the denomination that supported Messiah College. The essay itself is a statement about the full-orbed responsibility Christians have together for family life. The author’s by-line also indicated that Skillen was “completing his doctoral studies at Duke University.” His curriculum vitae shows that he received an MA in 1972 when this was written; his PhD was conferred two years later.


Taking leave from the “false prophet” who called upon “Workingmen of all countries, Unite!”, Skillen frames an extensive discussion about united political action across the United States by an exposition of John 15:1-5 and John 17:15-23. The seminary graduate shows that biblical exegesis is not just a “church” thing, but of decisive and critical importance for this small group of reformed Christians (NACPA) who were thinking about their political involvement. This was Skillen’s first contact with, and first speech for, the organisation that became the Association for Public Justice.

1973


Skillen extracts 8 points from this translation of Goudzwaard’s manual for Christian political thought and action. Politics is unavoidable. Politics invites human judgment; the facts do not speak for themselves. When confronting various political options, one is inevitably confronting worldviews of those who have judged that these options need to be considered. The Gospel is no ideology.

This is a significant series. Critical ideas about America’s view of its own place in the world are explained. It was written when Skillen was Assistant Professor at Messiah College when he was also working on his Duke University doctorate. This is an initial publication as Skillen began the demanding work of subjecting American government policy to careful and detailed scrutiny. As with his articles this is a report of “work in progress”, written to provide a signpost for further theoretical research while distilling the results of his reading, making them available for his students and other readers. Skillen’s work over the decades has retained the “bibliographical essay” format that can be discerned here. The series has three parts - Part I: The Contemporary International Context; Part II Nixon-Kissinger Policy; (No.11) Part III: Some Questions and Criticisms (No.14). It is written when the USA was involved in convoluted peace negotiations in Vietnam.


This article written as a member of the Department of Social Sciences at Messiah College compares and contrasts the evangelical eclecticism of the essays edited by Clause, Linder and Pierard with the biblical theological concerns of John Howard Yoder and Bob Goudzwaard in his handbook (see review No. 8 above). Skillen notes they are all concerned with Christian political responsibility today. As he began his academic career, Skillen saw himself alongside other Christian academics who came from a variety of anabaptist, reformed and evangelical traditions. So, this article for the quarterly Bulletin of the International Association for Reformed Faith and Action shows Skillen seeking to responsibly address the variegated readership and audience of IARFA. The article is organised according to how these three books answer three questions: How are we to understand the relationship between the rule of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ on the one hand and contemporary human political life on the other? Then, with that question answered, he moves to the next question: How are we to understand the meaning of the creation order and human sin as they determine the character and normativity of earthly government and politics? The final question is: How are we to then understand the relationship between the individual and society, between personal faith and social structures, between a so-called inner spirituality and an outward community responsibility?


This thesis was written under the supervision of Dr John H Hallowell and in its Acknowledgements pays tribute to Dr Robert D Knudsen of Westminster Theological Seminary for “important instruction and advice with respect to the Dutch Calvinists during my seminary years”, as well as Dr Arthur F Holmes who “laid a valuable foundation in the history of philosophy during my college years” at Wheaton College, Illinois. After receiving a BD at Westminster, Skillen spent 1969-1970 in graduate study in philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam and from 1972-1974 was at Duke University where he received both MA and PhD degrees. This completed his formal education. He was then aged 30. The work is divided into two parts.

Part One In the Struggle for a Christian Politics is in three chapters I. Christendom; II Humanism; III Calvinism. The history that Skillen recounts is very much the view of the earliest beginnings of the church that can be derived
from the writings of the major Calvinist social thinkers (Calvin, Althusius, Groen, Kuyper, Dooyeweerd).

Dooyeweerd’s mature political theory constitutes the second half of the thesis. IV. The Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought; V. The Basic Religious Motives of Theoretical Thought; VI. The Systematic Theory of Politics and the State; VII. Summary and Conclusions. The focus throughout is upon the “political community” of rulers and subjects, of government and citizens.

It is notable that in his critical representation of Dooyeweerd’s thought that he identifies some ambiguities and contradictions that arise in his view of the universality of temporal modality that Skillen will take up and develop in systematic terms in 2021 (see No.512). (see IV. The Transcendental Critique of Theoretical Thought pp. 275-331 especially at p. 317 where he suggests: "... it appears that the temporal mode of reality’s existence is truly the original, or first, or lowest, or simplest modality."


In The Christian Patriot May 1973, 29:5, Skillen was introduced to subscribers of the Christian Government Movement’s (CGM) magazine with a front page report of a March 24 conference in Sewickley, Pennsylvania. The report summarises an extensive discussion of the four major historical viewpoints of the relationship between church and state. Skillen is reported to have developed a fifth viewpoint - associated with the thought of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd. From this report it is evident that a problem arose from within the audience about Skillen’s exposition and the way he explained the workings of God’s normative creation order in the life of Christian discipleship. God’s order for government as revealed in Christ has become apparent to the Body of Christ, Skillen is reported to have said, when they become obedient in political deed. This article is subtitled, “Or, what is Christian Politics? Part 2.” This is the second of a Christian Patriot series. It illustrates the Christian world-view in general terms by quoting Harry Blamires (No.13) and Robert Farrar Capon (No.4).

1974


15. “Philosophy and the Christian College” The Evangelical Visitor LXXXVII, 3 10-11, (February 10).

https://mosaic.messiah.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3219&context=evanvisitor

The Evangelical Visitor, was a magazine circulating in the community supporting Messiah College, where Skillen was Assistant Professor when he wrote this piece. A photo shows him in conversation with a Dean of the College. This is another of Skillen’s publications which demonstrate his immediate concern to apply his own theoretical reflections to the situation in which he found himself (see No. 6).

Here Skillen brings together his philosophical studies at Wheaton College and subsequently, to make a comment about the unavoidability of philosophy within the college curriculum.

Rather than problematise “philosophy” as a department, the discussion indicates that philosophy has to do with the way scholars reflect upon the meaning and the purpose of their study and their teaching and how the ethos of the college welcomes students to question in order to discover Christian questions, and to then question further in order to find Christian answers.

As the title suggests, Skillen contributes to the CLAC convention by means of a reference to Shakespeare since his advice may be important for those who Lock themselves away "in a closed off world of unreal academic stuffiness." He then reverts to the early chapters of Genesis to reckon with industry in the context of the fall and Christ's redemption: "Man’s sin against God and against his fellowman leads to nothing less than the cursed loss of all that is good in God’s and man’s labours.” The Biblical story does not stop at the announcement of this loss but is part of the Good News of the salvation of our life in its entirety. That includes work, labour, industry. The meaning of work is to be found in the context of God’s love for the world, in Christ’s love for industrial life in all its dimensions. "As Bob Goudzwaard properly insists, we must need lose sight of the basic motive of the Christian trade union movement which is to recognize that the worker is God’s image bearer and not just an economic production factor.” Having also considered the historical and economic diagnoses of J K Galbraith and William H McNeill, Skillen introduces the Lesslie Newbiggin’s Honest Religion for Secular Man 1966. Newbiggin pinpoints the need of an industrial order to be rooted in a religious sense of human responsibility thankful for the love God has shown to us which then motivates our love for our neighbours.


This review by a graduate of Wheaton about the book written by three Wheaton professors begins in this way: "Three such qualified men should not have allowed this book to go to print .... Part of the tragedy of this book is that not all of it is bad. Very simply, the review can be summarised as: Good topic for discussion; but “a coherent, inter-dependent discussion” of higher education has not been achieved. Webber’s historical call for a biblically-inspired reformation is not heeded by the other two writers.”


Up until this article, Skillen’s publications have mainly been the writings of an aspiring “public intellectual”, a form of journalism for the educated, informed by rigorous scholarly argument. His first publication, the analysis of Karl Jaspers in the journal of the national honour society for philosophy, provides the exception, and also illustrates Skillen’s acumen as a philosophical commentator and analyst. This is the second such analytically-oriented article, in which the philosophy of one thinker is subjected to scrutiny. In terms of the kinds of publications that we would expect would be needed for academic advancement this would, perhaps, be the first of that kind among Skillen’s publications. The article is explicit in noting that it has been written by “James W Skillen PhD” which is also noted in the table of contents and on the header of each page. An indirect but significant recognition by the editors. This article distils the analysis of Althusius that Skillen developed in his Doctoral Dissertation The Development of Calvinistic Political Theory in the Netherlands with Special Reference to the Thought of Herman Dooyeweerd (No.12). It is found in Chapter III “Calvinism” where Skillen successively examines John Calvin (pp.180- 191), Johannes Althusius (pp.191-217), Groen van Prinsterer (pp.218-225) and Abraham Kuyper (pp.225-273). These are presented as Dooyeweerd’s historical precursors. The Calvinist attempt at political theory has to find a way to counter State absolutism and that is why Skillen, following Dooyeweerd, spends time considering the absolutist formulations of Jean Bodin. Althusius’ theory is not just a minor disagreement but a radical divergence from Bodin’s politics.

Skillen had obviously been developing his literary skills via different kinds of book reviews. We recall “The Governor and the Chef” in Vanguard in May/June 1971 (No.4 above), and his commendation of Robert Farrar Capon to a CGM readership (No.10). This is the 5th review for Vanguard. Skillen takes Novak’s book as another instance of getting the religious character of American political life wrong. He reads Novak’s discussion as a latter-day fulfillment of the view of Walt Whitman that what America needs is a fuller richer, religion of democracy.


This review is critical of Rushdoony’s revisionist thesis that the development of a strong central, federal government in the US, along with the birth of the United Nations with its hope for world peace through world law, is all part of the anti-Christian conspiracy of the last two centuries which has led America away from its Christian order of life that it once had when it was a feudal, local, republican system. Rushdoony had written an Introduction to another of Craig Press’s volumes, Herman Dooyeweerd In the Twilight of Western Thought (1960). This is an early indication of Skillen’s awareness that revisionist conservatives like Rushdoony were promoting Dooyeweerd’s philosophy.


This review, unlike the previous one, notes that Skillen was teaching in the Department of Social Sciences, Messiah College. This is a brief review of one of the best known and most important economists writing in America at the time. The book was first published in 1953 and Skillen notes Heilbroner’s other contributions as well. In a concise half page the important names in the history of modern economics are mentioned. Skillen commends Heilbroner for making it possible for even the most unschooled reader to get a good start at understanding the history of economics.

1975


For the start of the 1975-76 academic year Skillen had moved from Messiah College to a similar position (Assistant Professor) at Gordon College. The article contrasts the desire for “independence” and “self-determination” in all modern states, with the increasing international interdependence across the globe. This is an examination of international relations. Skillen traces the history of “possessive individualism”, as a comprehensive political vision, from Hobbes to Locke, to Hugo Grotius. The essay is an explanation of why international justice is short-circuited by the trend which takes “possessive individualism” to the level of pragmatic power politics between states. There is thus a built-in disrespect for international law.


This is an article for “theorists”. It is an attempt to construct a framework by which to focus upon the theory-conundrum within political science. Then the question is broadened to consider “political integration” and how that can be “theorised”. Then the European Community is referred to as a kind of “case study”. The first section after the Introduction, considers Political Theorising.
What is theorising? How can the political system be delimited? And how can we make judgments about progress and/or regress with European integration?

The next section, Delimiting the Political System, takes the discussion through the various phases of functionalist ambiguity in the EEC’s reliance upon a continuum between economics and politics. As theorising tackles political integration, the full historical reality repeatedly confronts functionalist constructions with the fact of force or enforcement as a central facet for identifying states.


This is a front page piece which draws attention to the then recent resolution passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” Skillen’s comment encourages this theological community to recall that Zionism in its earlier form saw itself as a movement aiming to colonize an area in Palestine, and make it a political homeland for the Jews. At the beginning it was not racist. It was a Jewish equivalent of the liberation movements of Africa and Asia.

1976


Skillen begins the discussion with some comments from Harry Blamires The Christian Mind 1966. Skillen’s summary is pertinent even if it is a difficult paragraph: This shrinking of the Christian life into a narrow personal and “churchy” world has of course been devastating for education. What goes on in our classrooms, if it is to have any meaning at all, must have something in common with what is going on in classrooms elsewhere. Science, literature, philosophy, art, history - these are not the possession of a few individuals or of one institution.

But if there is no Christian perspective, no Christian philosophy, no Christian education, then we only fool ourselves if we imagine that we can have a Christian college without a Christian mind. Skillen’s rhetorical point is that there’s no point in having a Christian College if it becomes the educational place that defends the notion that there cannot be a Christian mind. And it is precisely that view which he is challenging because it is so very prominent.

The subsequent quotes from Blamires are concerned with the prevalence of a widespread misconception about Christian love and charity. Just as it is Christian to give way to other people’s interests, so Christians seem to believe it is appropriate to give way to other people’s ideas. This is a notion that is fraught with all kinds of ambiguity and assumes that religious beliefs are a matter of private possession.


The article is written to commemorate 200 years since the revolution of 1776. The article is not framed in Skillen’s characteristic textual-critical examination of argument in political philosophy, but takes off from a description found in Margaret Walker’s novel Jubilee (1966) in which Vyry, a black/white mother, has found Jesus and Randall Ware is stuck in bitterness about white racism. Skillen considers the deep problem that faces Christians and others when they confess that the United States is a freedom-loving country with a Christian constitution. Such a view remains blind to the division that is present because of a lack of recognition of the place of black Africans in American history. Considering the call of James H Cone for a revolution of disobedience based in an affirmation of the
absolute sovereignty of God over his creation, Skillen notes another group of Americans who consider that next to Christianity, the American system of government is the most precious gift to the world. There’s the problem, he says. If the Constitutional order is so perfectly Christian, how can there be any biblical justification for a revolutionary black power movement today? Or if the original constitution, which supported the states’ rights to slavery, was truly a violation of human dignity before the face of Almighty God, then how can Christians possibly view it as the greatest event since the coming of Christ?


A small piece on the revolution of 1776 translated by RO in the Netherlands. It examines the alleged Christian character of the American revolution and the notion that America is “God’s new Israel”. This is usually justified by reference to America’s puritan heritage as well as the impact of John Locke upon the framers of the 1789 constitution. The article also considers the development of American civil religion (Russell E Rickey and Donald G Jones American Civil Religion 1974) as well as the study of Rockne McCarthy “American civil religion and civil rights” in Vanguard (Jan, Feb, March 1976). The current USA electoral system is also examined; there is some consideration of Karl Marx’s observations of the so-called Christian state.


In the preface to this book Skillen, as Editor, draws attention to a collection of essays from Russia that speak of the spiritual revival then under way. There is a quote from an essay by Evgeny Barabanov which is concluded by this observation “Resurrection ‘from under the rubble’ is only possible through the resurrection of Christ in His redemption of the creation.” The preface contextualises the book’s focus upon North America, and Christian responsibility within US and Canadian polities by reminding the readers that God’s Kingdom rules over all the earth. Skillen’s own piece, the first of five contributions, is a critical examination of why a Christian political standpoint is absent amongst those claiming to be Christian. The problem confronting those who would develop distinctively Christian politics is that most North American Christians see no problem in having sanctified the current secularized political options. The heart of the difficulty is described thus: The deepest religious agreement that American Christians have about politics come not from the Christian faith but from their secular ecumenical faith in the American political way of life (p.3). Skillen develops the view that religion is life - all of life - and it cannot be compartmentalized. State, family, school, business are equally as religious as the church - they are all dimensions of man’s service to the true God or to false gods. This is Skillen’s explanation of why there is so little political agreement among Christians and identifies the compartmentalization in Christian thinking.

1977


A deeply appreciative study of the contribution of Senator Mark Hatfield as found in Between a Rock and a Hard Place (1976). This is one of the most unusual pieces of political literature in American history. No American politician has so relentlessly and determinedly gone back to the Bible to discern Christian foundations for political service. Skillen takes a long-run view. Hatfield raises questions that have long-term and powerful significance for the way Christians,
of whatever background, will consider their political involvement. It is in this positive and affirming context that Skillen tries to unravel the complex structure of Hatfield’s argument. There is a determined rejection of both civil religion and the idea that national self-interest is compatible with the religion of Jesus Christ. Hatfield describes his own approach in terms of a tension between the “purist” and the “apologist”. It is to this framework that Skillen directs his critical comments.

30. “International Interdependence and the Demand for Global Justice”


Later (in 1981) this article, with minor editorial additions, was to be Chapter 3 “Christian Principle and Political Reality” of International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice (No.71). Here again is Skillen’s sustained analysis of international politics, an ongoing effort to understand the prevailing “mind” that is dominant in the shaping of international relationships.

The article is Skillen’s attempt to confront the international reality, including the full reality of the impact of such realist policies upon international relations, seeking biblical guidance to provide an alternative normative understanding of how nations and states relate to each other, as they really function in a multi-dimensional way, within the constraints of the creation order. Norms concerning how states ought to view their foreign-policy making have to be clarified. The article again reiterates Skillen’s conviction that the America myth that it must maintain itself as Number One is one of, if not, the most destabilizing myths in the global context. The normative question in 19th century Europe, in the world today, and in the smaller world of tomorrow will remain: “What are the nations of the earth doing to achieve justice for all?” And the question comes with the greatest force and the greatest demand to the most powerful nations on earth.


Skillen is dismayed. Mouw appeals to Abraham Kuyper’s reformational worldview, but still writes to ground Christian political reflection and action in a “Biblical political theology.” Still, the critique is respectful of Mouw’s contribution – he argues that the biblical teaching of creation, fall and redemption is decisive for the way in which Christians approach their political responsibilities. Moreover, Mouw has made a serious effort ... to enlarge the dialogue on the subject among anabaptists, dispensationalists, modern liberals and Calvinists.

The central weakness in Mouw’s approach is described thus: [Mouw’s stated aim of developing a Biblical political theology] not only fails to make room for an integrally Christian political theory, but it fails to do so by implying that “sacred” “theology” must be brought into contact with “secular” philosophy in order to get a dialogue going between Christians who preach, counsel, and act and non-Christians who evidently deal with politics in a direct and non-theological way.


Skillen carefully dissects O’Grady’s book and finds it to be eclectic and lacking in a systematic presentation. O’Grady rejects a Greek dualistic view of human kind but when it comes to an explanation of who this integral being is, in biblical terms, Skillen observes that O’Grady puts together biblical, Thomistic and existentialist elements with ideas from latter-day Catholic thinkers without any integration at all.

The problem is clearly stated Skillen suggests, but there is no solution offered by way of an alternative Christian view.
In No.30 above Skillen discusses the Carter administration’s involvement in the trilateral commission: ... North Americans, West Europeans, and Japanese ... have become aware, since 1973, that the international economic arrangements established at the end of World War II with the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on tariffs and trade, and a few other charters and institutions, are inadequate to handle the international economic problems of today (30:28). Skillen, then at Gordon College, writes this article which is printed on 5 consecutive half pages below a parallel article by his Gordon colleague, Bill Harper. Harper reviews Carter’s domestic agenda. Skillen, as the title suggests, looks at the first few months of a ‘new’ foreign policy. He considers successively Western Europe and the NATO alliance, East-West relations and the continuing progress of trade liberalization with the Soviet Union and the SALT talks. The novel feature of Carter’s approach thus far is his public, verbal insistence that the protection of human rights is his top priority.

At the September 1992 National Town Meeting and 15th Anniversary Celebration of APJ Skillen addressed the meeting and included some humorous remarks, commenting upon the fact that when the Christian Action Foundation became the National Association for Christian Political Action many withdrew their membership. He went on to say that as a small organisation their aim was not to have fellowship but to always be an outward looking body - this, he said, was what was required if they were to be a genuine political organisation. That mentality has prevailed and it is articulated here, 15 years earlier, in this CJL Newsletter of the Canadian “Committee for Justice and Liberty” article. The development of NACPA was slow but the aim was to understand how to render solid Christian political service.

1978

35. “Response #3 to David C Jones ‘Who are the Poor?’” Theological Forum Reformed Ecumenical Synod VI, 1 Feb., 17-18.
In a two-page reply to David Jones’s word study on biblical uses of the term “poor”, Skillen expresses appreciation and develops his own view of the way the various uses hang together in the context of the overall biblical revelation about God’s creation, His judgment upon sin and His ever-active work of grace and mercy to overcome the depredations of human folly. It is their “hanging together” that Skillen emphasizes, over against any interpretation that would leave the two usages simply dangling side by side. Skillen’s comments, as a polite rejoinder, could be boiled down to the following: So what response does Holy Scripture call forth from us now? Skillen’s view is that poverty is a reference to the condition of not being free to enjoy God’s earthly blessings. The proper life for God’s creatures is to be rich in the enjoyment of God’s blessings.

This article was part of a joint APJ - National Union of Christian Schools testimony before the US House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee in support of Tuition Tax Credit legislation. The tax credit legislation currently being considered in Congress will clearly not do all that is necessary to establish full justice in the area of education, because even a substantial tuition tax credit from the federal government to parents will not be enough to give the non-government schools equal standing alongside public schools. Nevertheless, the legislation is a most important step toward equity and justice in education. It will give encouragement to those who want justice, who are oppressed by majoritarian and financial limits to their parental responsibilities and conscientious convictions. Congress should enact tuition tax credit legislation.
37. “Justice for All” Association for Public Justice (APJ) position paper.

When APJ (Association for Public Justice) was co-operating with the National Union of Christian Schools, testifying before the US House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee in support of Tuition Tax Credit legislation, this position paper was produced, along with the following one concerned with Education (No.38). This brief and compact statement promotes the Association and makes known its goals. It is a confessional document couched in “layman’s” terms. It explains how obedience to Jesus Christ confronts the Christian with public justice as a norm. Public Justice is then discussed in relation to the State and that is a basis for a consideration of the Government’s calling in the State.

38. “Justice for Education” APJ position paper.

This brochure has stood the test of time and more than 25 years later the Association is still working within the framework outlined in this 12 page discussion. It covers basic principles about education, who has the responsibility to educate, how American education has got into a problematic relationship with government because of government’s tendency to view itself as the “principal” authority for schooling which, in APJ’s opinion, it most certainly is not. The pamphlet outlines in brief the problem of educational freedom being compromised by government’s (civil religious) bias to schools which it sets up.


This paper was to be republished, with minor amendments, as “Christian Action and the Coming of God’s Kingdom”, Skillen’s contribution to the book he edited for the APJ Education Fund, Confessing Christ and Doing Politics 1982 (No.73).

It is a very significant piece because it outlines Skillen’s biblical vision since his undergraduate years. It concerns the sabbatical structure which pertains to the entirety of the biblical revelation about God’s relationship with His creation. The article begins with a consideration of “quietism” and “activism” - two dominant Christian responses discerned in the historical response to the challenges presented by Augustine (see No.43).

The discussion then moves on to the filling out of the general sabbatical framework, and the author then discusses two important images or metaphors that are frequently used to describe or represent the life of God’s people in this world, the metaphors of “sojourning” or “sojourners” and “homesteading” or “homesteaders”.

The subsequent discussion unfolds as Skillen’s attempt to explain why the best option for understanding our sojourning is in terms of our role as homesteaders; likewise for our homesteading, insight is to be found from our earthly sojournning.


This is a noteworthy contribution. It is evidence of an early (1978) stage in the long-term co-operative working relationship between Skillen and Bob Goudzwaard (see Skillen’s reviews of A Christian Political Option No.8 and No.10 above; see also Skillen’s reference to this paper by Goudzwaard and van Baars at No.74 below).

It is pointing at a very basic hurdle that Skillen believes has stood in the way of Christian thinking - an inability on the part of Christian people to know how to
think and respond normatively. Skillen takes a key point from the paper: “Thinking from the perspective of norms creates the greatest certainty concerning the steps which ought to be made at the beginning: the thinking from the perspective of future goals renders precisely those first steps that ought to be taken uncertain” (notice the slight alteration of original p.247).

Skillen sees great practical significance in this principle. Skillen is appreciative of an emphasis that decisively moves away from a secularist positivism in which “values”, “goals” and “trends” dominate the analysis to an acceptance of heteronomous norms.

In this regard he makes his most critical point - which, he emphasizes, is not a major criticism of the paper given its rich and valuable perspective - that Goudzwaard and van Baars tend to discuss the international economic order as if it is solely or mainly about governments and political organisations.


Dale Vree was not pleased with Skillen’s review. Vree’s rejoinder suggests themes and purposes of his book that were not evident in the review nor, presumably, in the book itself. The review is not altogether negative, and shows an interest in Christian-Marxist dialogue. Vree wanted to demonstrate that the dialogue was impossible. Hence Skillen’s concluding quote: “The greatest irony of the dialogue, concludes Vree, “is that as it has advanced it has become more and more monological and less and less dialogical. What began as a momentous conversation between two great belief systems has proceeded to become a monologue based on the dismemberment of both”.

42. “What is Living and What is Dead in the Reformational Movement?” Vanguard Nov-Dec, 20-21.

This is a significant aide memoire for that particular time. A few months previously Skillen had presented his paper to an AACS conference in Ontario (No.39). He had also just begun teaching at Dordt College.

The two page article was presumably commissioned by the Vanguard editor. Skillen begins with a “straight up” comment about the title of the piece. To speak of what is dead and alive is to speak with a degree of finality that is only possible at the Last Judgment. I, for one, am unwilling to attempt such a thing. Still he does encourage his readers to test the spirits. That is what the Lord calls us to do. Under the Spirit’s guidance we will have to discern what leads to life and what leads to death.

The article is an unabashed reminder to Vanguard readers of the gospel. It encourages them to maintain a Christian-cultural hopefulness rather than lapse into any counter-cultural skeptical negativism (or any Gnostic elitism).

1979


The point of this article is summed up neatly in Skillen’s introduction and conclusion. The introduction says: My thesis is that the basic questions about the nature of Christian responsibility for social justice posed by Augustine more than 1500 years ago are still the fundamental ones today, and that the Augustinian formulations of the questions control contemporary evangelical social thought on all sides - Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, and others.

The circumscription of “contemporary evangelical social thought” is indicative of Skillen’s desire, as a professor of political science involved in the Association for Public Justice, to develop some historical perspective on what unites and what separates evangelicals when it comes to social and political thinking. And that is why he identifies Augustine as a key focus for sorting through the various views.
The article creatively links these variant evangelical viewpoints with three not completely compatible viewpoints that can be attributed to Augustine’s writings as his intellectual orientation passed through different stages during his lifetime. Skillen makes it plain that he is not interested in mere classification. Augustine provides a focus by which Christian scholars, if they take a self-critical path, can begin to compare and contrast their respective contributions, and in such an attitude contribute to the disclosure of a Christian understanding about the way God’s Kingdom stands in relation to earthly responsibility.


Dooyeweerd died in February 1977. This article is a formal response to his contribution. It begins with a brief introduction to the Dutch educational and political context in which Dooyeweerd laboured. Then there is a comparison between Dooyeweerd and Kuhn in order to explain Dooyeweerd’s “law-idea” as well as to explain how he understood the order to which the special sciences were necessarily bound.

In the context of this critical examination of the foundations of science, it appears to me that Dooyeweerd’s contribution to the philosophy of the social sciences is twofold.

In the first place, he engages in a deeply historical analysis of the development of philosophy and science which helps to show why there have been different schools of thought, even with regard to the same subject matter, and, in the second place, he presents some unique systematic arguments that aid in the distinguishing and classifying of social sciences.


This is what the title says it is - an exposition of biblical teaching about the meaning and purpose of politics. In this sense it is one of those articles in which the author adopts an explicitly confessional approach, drawing upon his biblical studies at Wheaton and Westminster. It is an article that invites the reader to reconsider biblical teaching, to go back and read the bible in a new way with a new insight about the way in which God has made His servants to obey Him in their political stewardship. It gives the distinct impression that Skillen believed he had been given a fresh vision for biblically-directed politics in North America. His appeal to the biblical parable of Jesus concerning the wheat and the tares was to become a refrain in his writing over the years (taking the 1524 Anabaptist statement of Balthasar Hubmaier as a point of reference see No.28). And it has an important function right at the beginning of his argument, which gives him a Christian basis for asserting that the entire Christian body should be working for justice for everyone. It is not Christian justice for Christians to enjoy any political privilege at the expense of non-Christians. Non-Christians must be given every blessing in the political arena that Christians themselves enjoy. Just as the wheat and the tares enjoy the same sun, rain and cultivation, so Christians and non-Christians should enjoy equally the benefits of God’s grace given to the field of this world in the present age. (Published as Chapter 5 “Public Justice and True Tolerance” No.73 & No.146.)


This is a strange review of an apparently strange book, but not made any less so by Skillen’s “up-front” statement to that effect. According to the review the book not only has two names (one on the cover and another on the title page) but is really misnamed because it is an introduction to the thinking of Boyd H Bode, a relatively well-known American professor of education during the first half of the twentieth century who was neither a statesman, nor an orthodox Christian,
neither a political scientist nor an interpreter of Christian faith. But why did it need to be reviewed at all? The answer is to be found in two facts: 1. De Jong, an educator, considers Bode’s “gospel of democracy” to be a thoroughly secularized version of the Kingdom of God. 2. The author was also a one-time member of the Dordt College faculty (1965-1974).


Skillen’s presentation, 23-29 is then confronted by an opponent who claims to approach the subject with common sense and a comprehensive review of the development of religious liberty in America. Skillen’s retort (35-38) claims that Mr Doerr has not come to grips with what Skillen sees as the most crucial question, and that is: What’s the nature of “religion” and the practices that people might want to claim as “religious”? He has again and again asserted a certain view of religion which is one view of religion in this country. I don’t want his freedom to hold that view of religion to be abridged in any sense. The question is whether or not that view of religion ought to be imposed on all the rest of us. Skillen follows that up by asking how the religious liberty of those, albeit in the minority, who do not subscribe to Doerr’s view, is to be safeguarded against majoritarian imposition? The point that Skillen focuses upon is the assumption that Government is in fact competent, has the legitimate authority, to run schools and insist that funds go inordinately to its schools. The assumption is that funding from Government should be dependent upon the school adopting a neutral non-religious character. But Skillen argues that the “neutral” ones in the Government’s view are the only ones that receive money. In other words true pluralism is denied rather than required with the result that government takes the place of the church by controlling schools and ensuring that any school’s educational direction will conform to the agenda of the secular majority Doerr claims to represent.


Skillen’s commendation of Dengerink the warrior for Calvinistic Philosophy in the Netherlands and at Reformed Colleges in North America is balanced by a reserve for this book. He notes .. the author deals only quite generally with the idea of justice and the book provides only very general guidance as to the details of a normative Christian view of justice. It should be read in conjunction with other volumes, Skillen, advises.


Whatever the nature of your work, Skillen concludes, you will be strengthened and encouraged as a Christian by reading these essays. This is a collection of essays from The Guide the magazine of the Christian Labour Association of Canada. The essays were authored by Bernard Zylstra, Harry Antonides, Al Wolters, H Evan Runner, Calvin Seerveld, Bob Goudzwaard and Ed Vanderkloet.


In a brief and succinct analysis, Skillen explains why political representation in the United States is at odds with itself. On the one hand, a system of representation has been established at local, state, and federal levels that is designed to allow every adult individual to be represented as part of a single, undifferentiated, political community by means of the majority will of the whole.
On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly clear to many people that individuals who identify with a particular group cannot be adequately represented by a system that attempts to form an undifferentiated political community by stripping individuals of their group identity. In a succinct description of America’s system of political representation, Skillen identifies the key problem. Only one “group” is recognized and that is the “whole political community”.

Skillen’s analysis is subtitled: a proposal for revitalizing our system of political participation. He provides a brief explanation of how a significant but not revolutionary change might contribute to a new understanding of political representation. The pamphlet concludes with a carefully reasoned explanation of the electoral justice that can result from responsible proportionality.


We are informed by the editor, J B Hulst, that Skillen’s article was “written in preparation for the adoption of a political science major” for Dordt College. Hulst gives explicit support to Skillen by this editorial. His ‘rather long article is not only a part of that study (of North American and international political life), but it is also an example of how extensive and demanding that study and the development of ‘a Christian point of departure’ … must be.”

This article, with his IRB contribution “International Interdependence and the Demand for Global Justice” (No.30) would be incorporated into the Dordt Press publication: International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice (1981) (No.71) - this article is re-published as Chapter 4 “Unity and Diversity Among States: Roots of the Western Tradition”, 59-70 and Chapter 5 “Three Contemporary Views of International Unity and Diversity”, 71-98.

The aim of the article is to demonstrate why the political study of international relations is of vital importance to a Christian college curriculum. The first part reviews the development of the new sub-discipline after World War II and Skillen discerns its significance because the problem of political unity and diversity is an ancient one that antedates both the rise of the modern state and the emergence of contemporary social science methods. His brief glance at Biblical, classical Greek, Roman stoic and medieval traditions is followed by analysis of Morgenthau, Deutsch and the co-operative effort of Keohane and Nye.


This is an article in the “Ideas in Print” department, compiled by the editorial staff of Eternity with the by-line: “A survey of articles in small circulation publications.” It is a summary of an August-September Public Justice Newsletter (sic!) article (presumably of the same name) which examines the President’s moralistic response to the “oil shock”. Carter had revealed a deep contradictory stand when he appealed to the American people to put an end to their selfishness. Skillen was critical of the American assumption that America saves itself. A second reservation concerns the President’s view of the crisis as a loss of national faith in progress.

1980


This brief review, is significant. Skillen, 6 years after gaining the doctor’s degree, is willing and able to critically appraise the work of Jan Dengerink, a “senior statesman” of the reformational movement, and student of Dooyeweerd. There is also an implicit criticism of the book’s publishers in this review - .. one wonders
why the publisher did not provide a more adequate introduction to the book since it was intended for a general North American audience. Any worthwhile scholarly book should lead readers to other works.

54. “God’s Ordinances: Calvinism in Renewal” Pro Rege 8:4 June, 24-33.

A slight revision of this article was reprinted later as “Politics, Pluralism and the Ordinances of God” in Henry Vander Goot ed. Life is Religion: Essays in Honour of H Evan Runner 1981 (No.65).

As with No.51 this article is introduced by Rev Hulst of Dordt College the editor of Pro Rege. The editorial comment includes this paragraph: "As indicated in an earlier issue of Pro Rege (December 1979) the first appointment to the Center was that of McKendree Langley to the Abraham Kuyper Chair. A subsequent appointment placed Rockne McCarthy in the Visiting Lecturer’s Chair. Since McCarthy teaches several courses in the Political Science Department, James Skillen was freed to work one-half time in the center. Next year McCarthy and Skillen will be joint occupants of the Political Theory Chair...” Further discussion in the editorial indicates that work was proceeding on a reader and the three articles in the present edition would not be included in the reader. McCarthy’s article is “Liberal Democracy and the Rights of Institutions” which suggests that attempts are necessary to “clarify the rightful sphere of authority, the unique structural identity and the special tasks of the many institutions, including the state, in society. Langley’s article “God and Liberty” investigations Catholic social teaching from Lammenais who sought to return society to God in a pluralist framework to the teachings of Vatican II.

This 1980 Editorial links Skillen’s article by that of Langley, encouraging Dordt College’s supporting community to “... examine the Kuyperian tradition to see if any clearer theory and practice of Christian pluralism is possible.” Clearly a North American context was then being addressed. Seeking to ensure that Kuyper and Kuyper’s legacy as well as Dooyeweerd and Dooyeweerd’s legacy would not become some kind of advertising pitch for Christian higher education. (see Skillen’s response to Goudzwaard and van Baars No.40).

The article is 11 pages in length with one page of footnotes. It begins with a brief and compelling description of the historical problematic facing Christian people. It Is a brief account formulated with the risk of overgeneralization in view. The picture is drawn in terms of the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution and the aftermath in which we now live. Up until the French Revolution Christians, by and large, saw themselves riding through history and when the French Revolution burst upon European consciousness a decisive change was made when it was realized that human beings do not simply ride through history, they actually make history.

55. “Could This Be the Last of the Old Kind of Presidential Campaigns?” Vanguard, May-June, 5-6.

Skillen the creative, interrogating journalist engages in irony. There are several healthy features of the US presidential election campaign this year, if one only has eyes to see them. These features are about the exposure of basic weaknesses in America’s electoral system.

The first is that the candidates offer little that is new. Maybe the American people will realise that and begin to ask for something other than the same old stuff.

The second feature is that the pragmatism adopted by the candidates is exposed as an empty, directionless basis for political leadership, a constant shifting in response to events. Maybe “the people” will react by asking for a more principled approach.
The third feature is that the differences in viewpoint among US citizens are coming into full view following Vietnam and the emerging energy crisis. The fact that even in the middle of critical domestic problems the candidates must continue to face international issues is good for Americans who are among the last of the world’s parochial and chauvinistic citizens.


Skillen provides the readers of Beweging magazine, of the Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte with a review of “reformational developments” in science and philosophy in the United States. Since 1967, the foundational work of Runner at Calvin College, Knudsen and Van Til at Westminster Seminary, and Pete Steen in Pittsburgh has become focused upon the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. In some sense the article seeks to show what has been happening within the United States and thereby take the sole attention away from the controversies that had become associated with ICS, particularly in Reformed and Presbyterian church circles. The dominant pragmatism of American culture is an important factor that needs to be faced. As well, the US knows very few Christian associations outside the domains of church and school.


1980 was a presidential election year. This is an article of Skillen the political scientist, making his understanding of the political process known within the CRCNA, to the readership of its denominational magazine. What is missing? The answer is found in the closing paragraph: If you are a US citizen and if you see some decent and meaningful choices, be sure to vote November 4. Don’t give up either before or after the event. But do more than that. Take some time to discuss both the meaningfulness and the emptiness of this year’s campaign with your friends, and then resolve to work for something more honoring to our King and more just to our neighbours the next time around. Christian are not missing from the campaign this year but a solid Christian vision of public justice from a comprehensive Christian standpoint does seem to be missing. IN THIS SENSE Skillen’s article is designed with his own sense of fiduciary responsibility to fellow church members. One might almost call it a “pastoral letter” of a “political elder”.

58. “Kuyper on Covenant and Politics” The Kuyper Newsletter 2:1, June, 4-5.

This is an important note about Skillen’s involvement in the Temple University Center for the Study of Federalism which has given birth to a subsection called “Workshop on Covenant and Politics.” Skillen presented a paper: “From Covenant of Grace to Tolerant Public Pluralism: the Dutch Calvinist contribution”. This little note tells us that the main purpose of the paper was to show that although the disestablishment of churches in modern states has been accomplished chiefly through a secularization process that has rejected biblical, covenantal thinking, that process has not been universal. Enter the 19th century Dutch Calvinists and principled pluralism with its biblically based view of tolerance. Kuyper’s “unconditional disapproval” of the burning of Servetus is noted. For the state to fulfil its covenantal obligations before God did not require church control of confessional uniformity. Skillen notes that Kuyper began to articulate a concept of tolerant public pluralism which was not a departure from the covenant of grace (as eg Max Weber suggested) but rather as a consequence of his commitment to that same covenant. This is the Workshop that led to the publication of the four-volume work of Daniel Elazar The Covenant Tradition in Politics (see Skillen’s articles No.302 “Covenant, Federalism and Social Justice” Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics 20(2000):111-118 and No.308 “Can There be Just Politics Without Covenantalism?” in Calvin Theological Journal 36:131-39 below). Of note also is the fact that this paper is referred in footnote 71 of the paper listed as
No.64, “Christian Faith and Political Freedom ...” from a 1981 Christian Legal Society Conference. It is referred to as a “soon to be published” paper from the Temple University’s Center directed by Daniel Elazar, and its title then was “From Covenant of Grace to Tolerant Public Pluralism: the Dutch Calvinist Contribution.” This title is noted as a contribution to a forthcoming volume from Carolina Academic Press, 1985 edited by John Kincaid and Daniel J Elazar (eds) The Covenant Connection: Federal Theology and the Origins of Modern Politics. In 1996 the Calvin Theological Journal published Skillen’s article with a most interesting and suggestive amendment in the title ie replacing “tolerant” with “equitable”. “From Covenant of Grace to Equitable Public Pluralism: the Dutch Calvinist Contribution.” In many respects this is a summarizing update of the doctoral dissertation (No.12). The amendment to the title is also significant in that it shows a shift from using “tolerant” as a descriptive term to designate and thereby justify a particular (reformational) understanding of a differentiated social order in an academic context, to a public policy rationale that argues from a normative structural standpoint - “equitable” assumes a normative requirement qualifying the process of societal differentiation - in Skillen’s Doctoral dissertation consideration of Calvin, the term “equity” is emphasized (p.189) as Calvin’s understanding of the God-given goal for (our formation of) positive laws, natural law and the moral law. Reference here can also be made to No.283 “The Theoretical Roots of Equal Treatment” in Stephen V Monsma and J Christopher Soper (eds) Equal Treatment of Religion in a Pluralistic Society, 55-74.

59. “How I think I’ll vote” Eternity Oct, 32-33

Eternity magazine brought together a group of Christian citizens: Larry Richards, a Sunday School educator who was pro-Reagan in the upcoming election; Robert R Lavelle, an executive of an association providing housing loans to the poor who would give Carter his vote; Karin Granberg-Michaelson, a Lutheran social services counselor who favored John Anderson; Ronald H Nash, an academic, who was a Reagan enthusiast; Bob Cleath, a world-view oriented academic who taught communications and takes a rather cynical left-wing position that none will be able to break through the class structure and bring true equality; and Jim Skillen, who explains why it is that he finds himself voting for the lesser of evils, even as he rhetorically suggests that a vote for Reagan could only be responsible if it could be demonstrated how a limited government would actually promote justice for every citizen, for families and schools, for businesses and voluntary organizations; the final respondent was Nancy Barcus, a former English professor at Houghton College who would vote for Carter because of his Christian humanitarian openness.

60. Christians Organizing for Political Service: A Study Guide Based on the Work of the Association for Public Justice, APJ Education Fund.

The subtitle “A Study Guide Based on the Work of the Association for Public Justice” gives an accurate summation of what the book is about. It has 113 pages, 7 chapters and an appendix which publishes APJ’s succinct constitutional affirmations about Christian political responsibility. It expresses APJ’s vision for Christian political service. The book is also the fruit of the work of the Association. The task of writing this short book was an enjoyable one because it was done in community, for community, and with communal evaluation and support (p.vi). It was compiled at a time when evangelicals were looking for a way to express their political concerns. Though the book, strictly speaking, comes from a group which is distinct in its reformational approach, nevertheless it is compiled with the expectation that the groups who would gather to study the material would have to interact with these evangelical groups. The book is thus an essay and a study guide. Each chapter has a list of suggested readings; the readings are a mix of contemporary Christian responses to politics and standard works that would be found in political science courses at university.
The chapters are
1. A Hard Look at the Present Situation examining the sense of political crisis that had descended and how Christians were trying to find a voice;
2. The Biblical Basics - politics in the context of biblical teaching about God’s coming kingdom;
3. Justice in the Political Community identifies the structure within which political action makes sense and
4. Working Together examines the structure of our citizenship as it coincides with the diverse social responsibilities in which our life comes to expression.
5 Building a Movement: the Association for Public Justice provides an outline of the policies and strategies adopted by APJ. The section “Three prongs on one fork” is perhaps the most important 4 pages in the book (pp.66-69) in so far as it gives an account of APJ’s associational self-definition, its modus operandi.
6. What are the Consequences? outlines principles for associational development and
7. Where Do We Go from Here? gives a summation of the place of APJ in its current (1980) social-political setting. The Appendix as a Christian confession of faith concludes with a statement that indicates the Association’s understanding of the liberated and liberating character of Christian political action.

1981

62. “Justice for Education” (with Rockne McCarthy) in New Horizons (Orthodox Presbyterian Church publication) 2:2 Feb., 1, 11-12.
   See No.38 above.
63. ”President Reagan’s View of the World” Calvinist Contact Apr. 16, 9-10.
   A transcript of a radio interview (CJRT Toronto) with Gerald Vandezande, published in a Canadian reformed community newspaper. It is about Skillen’s view of Reagan’s emerging foreign policy. It continues Skillen’s critical commentary on Carter’s first year of office for Vanguard (No.33) also Toronto-based of the same reformed community (see also No.34 for Skillen’s contribution to the CJL Newsletter as a brief explanation of efforts south of the border which set up APJ. See also No.42.
   Skillen has two hypotheses to test with respect to Reagan: one is that he represents a reaction by Americans to the demands of working together in a coordinated fashion with all kinds of other people. The other hypothesis is merely that he represents “America is right”. Much of the discussion focuses upon El Salvador and the over-concern with security. The more the US spends on arms and security the more nervous it becomes.
   Later, describing APJ’s involvement in a coalition of organizations to seek a better way, Skillen observes:
   “We have been working with groups like Bread for the World. We’re having discussions with those who are trying to get at the heart of what the arms race mentality is because it’s a deep civil, religious, visionary, spiritual problem as well as what people think America should be. As we get full-time staff now in Washington, we’re going to spend quite a bit of time trying to work on those things. But we are quite small.”

This paper is an expanded version of the 1979 discussion “Augustine and Contemporary Evangelical Social Thought” (No.43). The framework for the discussion is set up as follows: The key question, of course, is this: “Do Christians manifest a strong commitment to constructive politics? If so, why and how? If not, why not?” Some other basic questions follow that one rather quickly: How does civic and political responsibility fit within the priorities of the Christian life? How should it fit? What are the norms of justice which should guide Christians in their efforts to establish good laws and to oppose bad ones? Should we look for anything distinctively biblical in all of this, or are Christians in the same boat as everyone else when it comes to politics and government?” The discussion proceeds as an attempt to penetrate behind our contemporary experiences and attitudes to the historical streams of thought and action that have shaped us. And who is “us”?

Broadly speaking Skillen, as a post-doctoral researcher, is trying to grapple with basic ideas that have long shaped western Christianity. For him, Augustine is probably the most influential figure in all of Christendom when it comes to these issues. His influence is evident today in almost every Christian approach to politics. “Us” therefore, refers to the many and varied streams of American (at this stage evangelical and protestant) Christianity who find their commonality in Augustine. But, at precisely this point, Skillen wants to point out that there are at least three different views of political responsibility to be found in the writings of Augustine. The discussion moves to Carl F Henry and the Moral Majority which seems to be consonant with that of Tim LaHaye of the Moral Majority until it is realized that what LaHaye advocates is an antithetical opposition between morality and humanism. LaHaye seeks to promote an American “love of virtue” that can be shared by Christians and non-Christians. In this he is close to Augustine’s view that the Christian approach should be one of preserving a particular political order in which they have some degree of freedom. The discussion moves on to John Howard Yoder and Jim Wallis to a discussion of the assumptions that all forms of coercion and hierarchical rule among human beings are excluded from the City of God. Skillen then considers the views of Ronald Sider, who via Evangelicals for Social Action has been busy calling for self-conscious Christian social action. In conclusion, Skillen outlines an alternative constructive approach to politics, indebted in various ways to Augustine, but seeking to overcome the inherent ambiguities that can be found in his thinking.

Politics will have to be connected more directly to both creation and redemption in Christ if this approach is to emerge. Christ’s appearance on earth has consequences for our life of service on this earth as we wait for the new heavens and the new earth. Such a busy waiting must take the antithesis seriously. Augustine’s second approach needs to be questioned because in that approach it is assumed that there are, and can be, no biblical norms for politics.


(this is an edited version of No. 54 above).

The first two paragraphs pay tribute to Runner’s Scriptural Religion and Political Task as one of the first that helped me to begin thinking normatively (out of principle) about a Biblical view of political and social life. Further on Skillen notes that Runner’s contribution has helped introduce him to a tradition of Christian thought and life which has led to a revival of concern for God’s ordinances for all
of life. A revived understanding of God’s ordinances, His will for all of life, is the key to a revival of Christian social and political life.


The footnote to this article reads: “As the editorial to this Pro Rege issue indicates, this essay will serve as the basis for an introduction to the section of the Reader on societal pluralism that approaches the subject from the perspective of ‘history and the unfolding of society’. This introduction will be followed by selections from Edmund Burke, Groen van Prinsterer and Jose Miguez Bonino.” Thus it was part of a project in political science initiated within the Dordt College academic context. Later, in May 1991, in the Preface to the volume that was eventually published, Skillen and Rockne M McCarthy wrote: This project began more than a decade ago when we confronted the need in both academic and political circles for a book like this. The Dordt College Studies Institute in Sioux center, Iowa provided the launching pad. From 1979 to 1982, when both of us were teaching and doing research there, the plan was conceived and work began both to collect readings and to write introductions to them in order to produce a volume that would acquaint students with recent traditions of thought that are largely unknown in North American circles. Significant sections of this article are discernible in the introductions to excerpts of the various writers in that work Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society 1991 (No.211). The aim of the article (and indeed the project which brought the reader to publication) was to help illustrate the argument from history by those who began to argue from history (who) still held onto aspects of older arguments - arguments based on natural law or divine right or hierarchical order - but a new mode of reasoning was emerging.

The article considers Edmund Burke’s response to the French Revolution, Groen’s objections to the Revolutionaries and the Liberation Theology of Bonino (ref to No.105) is also included in this discussion. What this article shows is that at the outset of Skillen’s involvement in the Association for Public Justice, he was formulating an ongoing theoretical project to develop a systematic and comprehensive theory of societal differentiation, a social-political-economic philosophy.


A brief comment on William R Brown’s July 8th commentary on Israel’s defense policy.

...Israel’s desire for unchallengeable security cannot be met with bigger and better weapons alone. The search for a perpetual Number One status can not promote genuine defense and world peace.


(See also No.83 and No.244) The Introduction begins with a discussion of Ernst Bloch Atheism in Christianity: the Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom 1972 and then moves on to Roger Garaudy Marxism in the Twentieth Century 1970 which are both scholarly considerations of Christianity that had emerged from within the Marxist camp. Skillen says that Bloch has posed a crucial question for Christians: Is Christian faith caught between a fallen creation and an apocalyptic rebirth that will not restore the six days of creation and its original paradise? Is the Christian hope for a salvation that transcends human action, human responsibility, human history, human freedom? The paper is written on a ‘large canvas’, not only wanting to encourage Christians to listen to Marxist critique but also to engage in a way that articulates a Christian vision that can meet the Marxist eschatology. In this paper Skillen begins to expand on his pluralist social-political-economic philosophy in which justice, love and stewardship are God-
given mandates ... “In contrast to Marx and Rousseau (‘every citizen should speak his opinion entirely from himself’) I would argue that the creationally dynamic differentiation of human social life requires the normative public integration of social diversity in ways that guarantee justice for all persons, social relationships, and institutions... The Kingdom is the Sabbath rest of God, opened to us through Christ's resurrection, calling us here and now to stand in His freedom and to act without reserve for justice to be done to all our neighbours.”


This 13-chapter book argues in detail that the Christian mission must be understood in triangular connection with discipleship and justice. Skillen agrees that God is at work in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in ways that many Westerners have not yet fathomed. The book provokes of a re-thinking of the way mission is related to life as a whole.


see No. 76 below.

71. *International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice* Dordt College Press.

This is a book of 7 chapters that brings together some previous published writings in one volume:
Chapter 1 Power vs Justice: the Crisis in International Politics
Chapter 2 America First is based upon the NACPA Politikon articles of 1973-4 (Nos. 9,11,14)
Chapter 3 Christian Principle and Political Reality is a slightly edited version of the article in the International Reformed Bulletin 1977 (No. 30).
Chapter 4 Unity and Diversity Among States: Roots of the Western Tradition and
Chapter 5 Three Contemporary Views of International Unity and Diversity were previously published in Pro Rege Sept 1979 (No. 51).
Chapter 6 Human Rights on a Global Scale was specially written for this volume.
Chapter 7 International Justice: Is it Possible? Is a republication of the article by the same name in the International Reformed Bulletin 1975 (No. 22).


This is a reprint from an editorial in PJR.

It consist of 5 basic points in response to the rise of Solidarity and this edition is also given the sub-title “On guns and yardsticks and underground mimeographs”.

“We know that something unusually powerful and important has occurred, but we, and perhaps most Poles, do not yet realize all the implications. Solidarity’s persistent non-violence has been notable. A great deal of political maturation has occurred despite communist oppression. The Solidarity leadership and Lech Walesa have insisted that the problems are first of all political. The Catholic Church has made an important contribution behind the scenes. From the late 60s and early 70s people have been steadily and quietly working away. A few people can make a big difference ... What can we learn from Poland? Many things! But we must have eyes and ears open to receive the lessons.”
1982

73. Editor & Contributor, Chapter 5, “Public Justice and True Tolerance” (54-62) and Chapter 7, “Christian Action and the Coming of God’s Kingdom” (88-103) in Confessing Christ and Doing Politics APJ Education Fund.

Chapter 5 is republication of “Public Justice and True Tolerance”, (No.45 and No.146) and Chapter 7 “Christian Action and the Coming of God’s Kingdom”, is a republished version of “Politics and Eschatology” (No.39). This has been a constant theme in Skillen’s work, as he says in a later essay which develops this same biblical teaching (No.245 and No.287). “There is a thread running through the work that some of us have been doing at the Center for Public Justice ... the revelatory and anticipatory character of politics and government; it concerns the widest and deepest meaning of political life from a Christian point of view ... my aim is to say something about government and politics that is all encompassing, something that actually situates every detail of our civic responsibility.” (No 287 p.59). This “thread” has recently been woven into the full fabric of God’s Sabbath with Creation (No.506).


This article was published at the time Skillen had taken up the position of full-time Executive Director of the Association for Public Justice in Washington DC. That is some distance from where Pro Rege is published. The article addresses the widespread Christian ignorance about the “North-South” dialogue with respect to the way in which the world’s resources are unfairly and unequally dominated by the “North”. It is thus an educative piece, as well as an attempt to encourage North Americans to think globally in terms of God’s norms for love, truth and justice. In the final sections of the article Skillen expresses his indebtedness to Bob Goudzwaard (see No.8, No.10, No.40, No.54). He quotes extensively from Goudzwaard’s 1978 paper to which he had responded in the Justice in the International Economic Order Conference (No.40). The aim of the article is to stress the political and historical dimensions of loving our neighbours in a global context. 100 new states have entered “our world” since World War II. The “North” meanwhile continues on its way believing “development” and “progress” in advancing national self-interest is the only way to go. The South is usually viewed by the North only in times of danger, threat, famine and disaster.


This article’s by-line tells us it was prepared for the 1980 Science, Philosophy and Religion Symposium, September 11-13, 1980, Air Force Weapons Laboratory, Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico.

The central part of the paper is a discussion of the inconsistencies and ambiguities implicit in US Defense Policy - problems are viewed in a technical frame of reference where a trust is ascribed to technological know-how to bring about resolutions to problems that are, however, essentially political; the commitment to non-proliferation of nuclear weapons coincides with global proliferation and massive billions-fold increases in spending to develop the US nuclear capability; the third is the search for invulnerability in defense which cannot be guaranteed in military and strategic terms alone.

The discussion of these contradictions is introduced by a section that re-writes parts of International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice Chapter 3 No.71, 40-42) and drives home the point with some additions: after outlining the current contradictions in American defense policy, Skillen returns to his analysis
of America’s “Number One” false ideal (begun in his NACPA Politikon series of 1973-74 No.9, No.11, No.14 and continued in No.71, pp. 34-38) where the discussion repeats and elaborates on six points (pp.34-38).


Skillen’s debate with the evangelical R G Puckett in the pages of the well-known magazine, highlights the problematic of arguing against a civil religion that wants to cloak itself in Christian civic piety (see No.70 but also No.47).

Skillen’s rebuttal of Puckett’s evangelical defense of civil religion is in terms of a norm of equity to all religions. Freedom is a precious but frail possession. We must battle for religious and educational freedom as for all other basic freedoms of human life.

The basic concern upon which Skillen builds his argument is justice. America needs to find an equitable arrangement for educating the youth of our land. The issues he raises about the historic marginalizing of Catholics and Jews by a “common school”, biased in favour of the protestant majority in late 19th century America, is not addressed by Puckett, the Baptist.

In Skillen’s view Christians need to have dialogue and discuss the whole structure of education so as to formulate a new equitable system for the education of every student in this country. Tuition tax credits are just one small step in the right direction.


This is an academic article which is notable for a few reasons. Here Skillen and Carlson-Thies join together in writing an article that brings together material that both of them had studied in depth in their respective doctoral research programs, Skillen studied at Duke University (No.12).

Carlson-Thies, at that point, was a doctoral student in political science at the University of Toronto. He was writing a dissertation “Democracy in the Netherlands: Consociational or Pluriform?” which explored the role of Protestants and Catholics in the development of Dutch politics and public policy in the 19th and 20th centuries.

It is also published in a journal associated with the project by Daniel Elazar at Temple University (see also No.58 and No.251, No.294 & No.302).

The article takes issue with the “Enlightenment bias” that societal differentiation and political modernization is simply a part of the “factual” decline of religious influence in social life. European Christian Democracy was essentially Roman Catholic except in Holland (Fogarty) and the article reviews Daalder’s critique of Almond’s concept of the secularization of political culture when it comes to explaining the religious groups or sub-cultures in Holland.

The article briefly reviews the consequences of the revolt against Spain, and the impact of Althusius, critic of Bodin, upon the emerging federated political system of the Netherlands. Althusius provided a basis for a schema by which later generations could begin to give a clear account of the increasingly complex processes of social life by which various social spheres had differentiated themselves and developed their own distinctive character. This was a central facet of the emergence of modern Europe.

It is a subtly written article which concludes in a way that addresses the issues with which it began.
But whatever the current or future state of Dutch political life, its experience of the past hundred years shows that democratic stability can be built on a great diversity of cultural, spiritual communities, and that an efficient performance of government tasks need not require “cultural secularization”. Modernization and secularization may go hand in hand; but they may also march in different directions.


See No.70 and No.76. This republishes the main part of No.76, but does not include Skillen’s rebuttal of Puckett’s views. No.76 gives the five questions Skillen answers in his rebuttal.


In this edition of the Wheaton Alumni Magazine, Mark Amstutz leads off a discussion of “rising evangelical involvement in politics” and there follows “6 voices” who answer his prepared questions: Paul Henry ’63 a republican representative in the Michigan House of Representatives; Shirley Halleen ’57 a Democrat serving in South Dakota; Daniel R Coats ’65 Republican US Representative for Indiana (who was Kuyper Lecturer for 1997 see No. 275 below); Richard Halverson ’39 (Chaplain US Senate); Robert P Dugan ’53 Director of Office of Public Affairs NAE; and James Skillen ’66 Executive Director, Association for Public Justice.

80. co-author with R. McCarthy and W. Harper Disestablishment a Second Time Christian University Press.

In response to a glowing Foreword by Martin E Marty that this is an important piece of research that has not received the respect that is its due, the authors concede that “... he also raised some important questions, and we offer his Foreword as the first step toward the dialogue that we want to carry forward with others on this important subject.”

It’s not at all clear that Marty actually understood the basis of “principled pluralism”, but what he wrote seems to have provided a guide for further research and discussion of the history American pluralism.

The current problem with the establishment of a secularist definition of religion is traced back to the advocates of a new order for American education based upon the ideals of the Jeffersonian republic.

In a later work In Pursuit of Justice 2004 (see No.341), the historical analysis has developed to the point where Skillen advocates a “fourth order of pluralism”.

That is in Chapter 4 “E Pluribus Unum and Faith-Based Welfare Reform”, 59-75. See No.316 for an earlier version and Chapter 6 “Equal Education for All”, 93-110. See also No.305 for a contribution of Marty’s web-site.

The authors identify the problem as the establishment of a civil religion in America: an establishment that apparently flies in the face of the principle of religious freedom but which is in fact consistent with constitutional, Jeffersonian principles. ‘Religion’ defined as private opinion, private voluntary associations (churches), and personal piety is, of course, not established politically and remains privately free. But ‘religion’ in the Jeffersonian sense of a common religious morality that undergirds the social harmony of the republic has been established plainly and simply by the constitutional principles of the sovereignty of the people and the rule of the majority. That establishment has been furthered by a governmentally imposed public school system that monopolizes almost all public funds and legal support on the grounds that it is the only common,
secular, nonsectarian school system and thus the only system capable of
legitimately training all citizens for life in the universal republic.... American
public education, founded upon Jeffersonian political principles, lies at the heart
of the American civil religion (pp. 50-51).

The argument of the book is outlined thus:

Chapter 1 Civil Religion and the Foundations of the Republic The High Middle
Ages, Renaissance and Reformation and Early American Foundations.
Chapter 2 The Republican Vision of Thomas Jefferson
Chapter 3 Advocates of a New Order for American Education
Chapter 4 The Public School Institutionalized The Eighteenth Century, the
Nineteenth Century, Massachusetts, New York City, and the Consequences of the
Struggle over School Funding.
Chapter 5 The Supreme Court Faces the Schools Question
Chapter 6 Resolving the Constitutional Difficulties
Chapter 7 State Education: European Alternatives
Chapter 8 Toward Justice for American Schools

This is an attempt to deal with the problem of public education and the secularist
bias in the public funding of education in historical, legal and social terms.

81. "Justice for Land and People" with T Malloch. Kit and Position Paper of the
Association for Public Justice. APJ Education Fund.

This kit is introduced in these terms:

World hunger, continuing population growth, persistent environmental problems,
and many resource shortages are bringing us to a new awareness of the intimate
connections between human society and the land, air, and water on which we
depend for life. Laws and public policies that define ownership and use of land
determine the rights people have to grow food, build houses, drill for oil, mine
for coal and minerals, charge rent, hire workers, and sell for a profit. Competition
for land in the United States is intensifying in the multiple quest for industrial
development, food and energy production, and housing.

This kit has 13 items: 1. How to use this kit; 2. How to get involved in land-
related issues; 3 APJ position paper (see No. 78); 4. “Food, Farming and Foreign
Policy”, Theodore R Malloch; 5. “Land Rights; Stewardship, and Justice” Jim
Lamm, 7. Southamton, NY case study, Edward Connolly; 8. A page on state laws
and agencies in land management; 9. An exploratory booklet about farmland
loss; 10. A list of other APJ resources; 11. A list of material from elsewhere; 12.
A glossary; 13. An explanation of Government jurisdiction at different levels.

This, the third brochure containing APJ’s “position statement” (the other two
were on Education No.38 (also No.62) and Representation No.50) is a part of
APJ’s early education of its members, and hence part of the effort to contribute
to “a growing sense of Christian communal consensus about politics, rather than
ambiguous confusion” among its supporters and friends (see No.34).

In later welfare reform, Stanley-Carlson Thies gives leadership. Here Theodore R
Malloch is Project Director.

82. “Ethics and Justice: What Should Governments do for the Environment?” in
E R Squiers (ed) The Environmental Crisis The Ausable Trails Institute of
Environmental Studies, 227-234.

In this essay, a contribution to a symposium convened by the Ausable Trails
Institute, Skillen asked the question: What should Governments do for the
environment?
In a discussion that might distinguish the ethical from the legal but which presupposes that [q]uestions of how we “ought” to live and act are not all of one kind. Skillen elaborates: So-called factual situations cannot be contrasted with just a single set of “value” considerations. Therefore we must clearly distinguish the types of ethical, legal, economic and other normative questions we want to ask about the environment and about our human responsibility for it (pp.227-228).

Human responsibility for justice is more than public justice but human flourishing is undermined if Government’s role to uphold public justice languishes.


See No.68 above. Paper initially delivered August 13-20, 1981 see No.68 for original and No.244 for excerpts.


An important brochure setting out APJ’s Christian view of the debate that followed the US Supreme Court’s decisions of 1973 Roe v Wade and Doe v Bolton. Having set out the brochure’s limits, the discussion continues with a brief overview of the public debate and why change is needed at that level. In discussing the calling of Government and citizens the brochure is clear: Life is never merely a private affair. And then: “It is unjust, we believe, to remove one small segment of the human population (the unborn in the early stages of pregnancy) from public legal consideration and to treat that segment as simply “at the disposal” of other human beings.”

This is the basic framework for the discussion that follows. In public law, the brochure argues, the strongest and most basic presumption ought to exist in favour of life - protection of the basic right to life, including the life of the unborn. This is foundational. This is also part of a political principle by which government should give marriage and family every protection. The argument of the brochure is decidedly against the presumption that human life, at any point, should be left unprotected.


This is a brief discussion in PJR that describes contemporary developments in the reigning liberal ideology that will then have a large impact upon political reflection in the decades ahead. It is a critical examination of pragmatism and its emphasis upon problem-solving.

Skillen’s alternative: "We need to reflect deeply, debate heatedly, and work long hours to consider the issues and questions that pragmatism can never handle. Ae should be trying to promote the kind of political changes that will encourage citizens and representatives to argue meaningfully about the foundations of the Republic, as well as about its daily problems. Ultimately, we must ask if America is just, and not simply if it “works”.

1983


In the context of debate about the ability of Congress to do anything positive about the state of the union, Skillen introduces the “ten new directions” provided by John Naisbitt’s Megatrends (1982).
While ignoring the weakness of America’s political system, Naisbitt has some insight. Whatever the positive merits of new grassroots local political activity, Naisbitt is too quick to bid good-bye to representative democracy.

If it is true that we are moving increasingly from a national economy to a world economy (#3), from short-term to long-term thinking (#4), and from an industrial society to an information society (#1), then it is essential that we respond to the new demands of national and global integration being placed upon us. Without structural reform enthusiasts for participatory democracy will find they are “participating more but enjoying it less.”

The one-page article concludes with reference to an Atlantic Monthly article which identifies some trends, including the rise of PACs, that has led to a congressional paralysis - legislation that is less coherent and less meaningful.


This is the second listed article Skillen wrote for the CRCNA denominational magazine The Banner. As with other articles of this type, it is an attempt to educate fellow church members, readers of the magazine, on the basis of a principled stand. Moreover, Skillen begins with an explicit statement that it is a useful topic for discussion within which readers can reassess their taken-for-granted views of the purpose of government and the responsibilities of citizens. Skillen does not only apply just war criteria to the question of nuclear weapons; he raises a prior question: If nuclear weapons are used, or if a country even threatens to use them, can the principles of a “just war” still apply? So in this educative piece, written in the context of attempts to wind-up the nuclear stand-off between the US and Russia, with the production of MX missiles and other ICBMs, Skillen is also providing a frame of reference in which to evaluate the debate and provide an alternative approach.


This is Skillen’s contribution to a Festschrift collected together to honor his doctoral supervisor. The Editorial preface by Francis Canavan notes that Hallowell “sang outside the chorus of twentieth-century American political science [and] often felt himself to be a voice crying in the wilderness.” Hallowell studied the decline of ideologies and the emergence of what has been termed the rise of neo-classical political theory. He was an editor of publications written by Eric Vögelin. Says Canavan, “The other main strand in John Hallowell’s thought has been the Christian revelation. James W Skillen draws on it for his answer to the question he raises in [his essay] . The created universe, he says, is complex and pluriform, not uniform and homogeneous. Human society, too, reflecting the order of creation, is inherently pluralistic. The public order that unifies it must therefore recognize society’s pluralistic character and respect the supreme authority of the creator from whom it ultimately derives its character. Any political ideology that suppresses societal pluralism for the sake of a univocal social goal - even of freedom, as in Rousseau - is totalitarian and idolatrous.”

Clark Cochrane, an Editorial Advisor of Public Justice Report also contributes to the volume with “The Radical Gospel and Christian Prudence.”

The discussion ranges over Poland and Nicaragua. Poland had seen the rise of an independent trade union movement that further enlarges the scope of structural pluralism in Poland - a pluralism undergirded by the independence of the Catholic church. Skillen draws on Hallowell’s observation that “only through a return to faith in God, as God has revealed Himself to man in Jesus Christ, can modern man and his society find redemption from the tyranny of evil”, to answer his
most profound question: the question of pluralism and the public good. The question is rephrased in these terms: Does the public good of the entire world demand principled support of societal pluralism or does it require the overcoming of that cursed hindrance to global unity? The revival of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, throughout the world, as important as this may be, does not, of course, guarantee public justice.

Skillen’s conclusion is in “Hallowell’s line” and extends it with the help of insights from the line of “principled pluralism.” A healthy response can come only by efforts rooted deeply in principle to build communities of public justice - public legal bonds that integrate a diversity into a complex unity. But the unity must have a very special and limited character, displaying a recognition that God has also given place, identity, and purpose to nonpublic associations, institutions, and individuals, each of which must be allowed to fulfill its calling in the creation.

This is a critical examination of the legal case in which an Arkansas law requiring schools to teach creation-science if they teach evolution had been ruled to violate the principle of separation of church and state on First Amendment grounds.

Skillen advocates that States begin looking for ways to design their public support of education so that science can be left to scientists and education to educators in all of their pluralistic diversity. The just way would have given schools the room to be themselves in terms of their own academic convictions.

The judge has pretended to settle the difference between “secular science” and “religion” and for creationists to presume that they can establish a non-religious basis for imposing creation-science on everyone, or for evolutionists to presume that they can adequately separate science from religion in order to keep religion out of the schools, is falsely presumptuous for both to the point of offending the consciences and interfering with the responsibilities of educators, scientists, parents, and a host of Christians and non-Christians alike.

Skillen is part of a forum including Cal Thomas, Moral Majority's vice-president for communication, and Dale Vree editor of New Oxford Review (See No.41, Skillen’s review of Vree’s book). Vree informs readers he has recently become a Roman Catholic. The purpose of the forum is to discuss Richard Mouw’s “A Thoughtful Approach: Understanding the Discipline of Communal Dialogue”.

Without saying that Mouw's call amounts merely to an affirmation that “Christian social action must be more disciplined”, Skillen proposes to move on and suggest the political implications of his general confessional statement.

91. “You win Some ... You Lose Some” CLSQ IV:4, 25.
This is a reflection on the political “game”. Recent abortion and education decisions handed down by the courts (including tax-relief for non-State school parents) are discussed in terms of Supreme Court rulings that win or lose narrowly or by a bigger margin.

In the case of abortion, Skillen refers to George F Will’s comment that recent legislation had strengthened the rights of the unborn (fetal rights) in many other matters apart from the right to life itself. That contradiction indicates the kind of work involved in politics.

If Christians are to put in place a whole network of laws that will deal with the full meaning of life for children, both pre-birth and post-birth then they have to be ready to do enough homework, pursue enough research, organise, to “play ball for the whole season.”
1984


A commendatory review which looks forward to Lash the theological philosopher exercising his considerable exegetical skills in further studies on Platonic, Aristotelian, Augustinian, and Thomistic texts as he has done with Marx. Skillen commends Lash for unveiling the structure and assumptions of Marx’s thought. He sheds important light on Marx’s narrow and inadequate view of both science and religion. He shows how Marx’s rejection of “idealist” religion could not do justice to those dimensions of Christian experience and understanding which are not qualified first of all by theoretical conceptualization. Skillen identifies some of Lash’s unexamined assumptions and presuppositions. It is judged to be a serious study which will raise questions that economists, political scientists and most philosophers do not ask. Perhaps the most intriguing part of the book is that which is connected to the main title: a matter of hope. Marxism hangs on its view of a fulfilled future - a culmination of the historical dialectic of human alienation. Christianity hangs on the expectation of the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in Christ. Skillen refers readers to his essay (see No.68, No.83) and to Johan van der Hoeven *Karl Marx: the Roots of His Thought* 1976.


Is politics on the way down and out? This is a meditation designed to be read after dinner, which included “dessert” purchased from the local store. But many people do treat politics as “instant politics” just like they eat “instant pudding” dessert. The Bible, however, gives us only “slow-cook”, “long-cure” recipes. Disciplines leading to endurance, long-suffering, patience, and insight are the biblical rule. Moreover, the Bible speaks of our relationship with God in enduring terms - father, farmer, teacher, shepherd. It also talks of God as our lord, king and master, judge and ruler in righteousness. So, prods Skillen, pretend politics doesn’t really matter or begin, in Christ, to take politics seriously. Pick up that instant pudding if you must, but put down those mistaken assumptions that have misguided much of American politics up to now... Begin to know the whole truth about following God, and learn the habits of enduring service to your neighbour in public as well as in private life.


A brief review which the author of the book refers to in his rejoinder to Skillen’s larger review for the Reformed Journal (see No.102). Wolterstorff was none too pleased with Skillen’s shorter reviews which appeared in Eternity as well as Christian Scholar’s Review. His interpretation of this review is that Skillen “regards my book as a rather disjointed agglomeration of disappointing discussions, and that he regards me as something of a Johnny-come-lately to political, economic and social issues (“little more than some initial passionate reflections emerging from his socio-political awakening”).


This is an article which, effectively, simply applies the principles of the APJ brochure Justice for the Unborn (No.84) to current debate within the US. As with the article on Nuclear Weapons, (No.87) it is written to educate readers of the CRCNA magazine about the different prominent positions that are being taken in public debate. If a distinctive contribution is to be made to public debate, then there has to be informed understanding about the different views in the debate. The article is a “decade later” discussion of the 1973 Roe v Wade decision. That
decision is defined in the opening paragraph as the right of privacy and freedom for a pregnant woman, thus giving her the right to have an abortion. Skillen reviews the changes within hospital culture as a result of the decision and also links this to the developments in medical technology in recent times. There have been other important court decisions and, as well, there is new understanding of the human character of the unborn. All this is evidence of a situation undergoing constant change.


This joint essay is written in response to the Roman Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter on war and peace. In this evangelical symposium of responses, the authors applaud the Bishops and they find few details to criticise in the text. However, the open-ended nature of the nuclear weapons debate requires comment on two general and two particular issues ... The first general point concerns the nature of public responsibility for government policy, and the second concerns the dilemma or ambiguity of a qualified acceptance of nuclear deterrence doctrine. The two particular issues that will concern us are the criteria of “proportionality” and “discrimination” in the “just-war” doctrine itself as they relate to deterrence strategy.


This is an important “early” introduction to the work of the Association for Public Justice, seven years after it had been organized. The article explains its work and how it had in 1983 opened its Washington DC office. The three-fold aim of APJ is put simply; (1) to influence government by means of (2) an active and growing grassroots membership that supports and participates in (3) creative and thorough policy research. A brief history is given which includes an account of the intra- organizational discussion that had to overcome considerable obstacles. It if (sic!) couldn’t be done right, then all agreed not to fool around. APJ was born when the pastors and teachers who had started the organization were joined by political scientists, lawyers, historians and citizens. An APJ testimony to the Senate Finance Committee in support of tuition tax credits opened doors and APJ was then able to offer written and oral testimony on a range of issues. A brief run-down of activities is given and a schematic view of how the Association is planning to meet demands and challenges.

A sentence is highlighted from Christians Organizing for Political Service (No.60): We should undertake every civic duty, every political action ... with the avowed understanding that they are not God’s will but only our response to God’s will.

98. “Just Defense and Nuclear Weapons” (with Ted Malloch) APJ position paper.

The brochure’s introduction states: “Important questions should be asked regularly by citizens about the foreign and defense policies of their governments. What limits should be placed on the use of force? What are the legitimate short-range and long-range interests of a state or of an alliance of states? How should the norm of justice obligate governments in the international arena? How central a role should the military have in the shaping of foreign policy?”

Thus the brochure is educative and aims to help citizens to understand their contribution to the administration of just by explaining the problem and debate about nuclear deterrence within the context of America’s national defense responsibilities.

The brochure’s discussion is organised under the following headings:
The Present Setting of US Defense Policy
Christian Perspective on War and Peace
The Background of the Present Debate About US Security Doctrines and Ideologies Impelling the US-Soviet Arms Race
New Realities Confront Old Strategies and Ideologies
Calling the US Government to Responsible Defense.

The concluding sentence reminds the Christian reader of the task that needs to be taken on: Making use of “just war” reasoning, Christians have much to offer in the process of fulfilling their contemporary obligations as citizens.


This is a review of the American election - Reagan versus Mondale - written for those with no close acquaintance with American electioneering. It canvasses Reagan’s nationalism and his attempts to keep his moralistic right-wing supporters. On the other hand Jimmy Carter’s Vice-President does not seem to realize that Carter failed not because he wasn’t practical, hard working and progressive but because he couldn’t pull all the pieces together into a coherent vision of the future. The writer admits that his article is written at the superficial level of American politics. Skillen assumes that Christians ought to be distinguishing themselves by their persistent preoccupation with matters of justice. Economic growth and American defense should be located in the context of a government’s efforts to promote justice.


This is a review of Jesse Jackson’s efforts to gain the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. Jackson is not simply a preacher, but one who has learned the Bible in the context of the cry for justice in contemporary America. The article identifies important features of the American political system and makes suggestions for how Jackson might prepare himself for the presidential race in 1992.

101. “Luther and Marx in 1983” CLSQ, V:2, 21

The East German communist regime had joined in the celebrations for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther. Luther helped bring down the old feudal order, so Luther fitted into the East German government’s view of history. And consider the weight of Marx, says Skillen. He can hardly be ignored. So then what shall we do with history? The answer is clear: History is the unfolding of God’s creation, stamped by the human choices God allows his own image to make. History is the response of human generations to God, whether in obedience or disobedience.

Luther and his followers did not get very far in political reform but he did point people to the liberating power of the gospel of Christ. In contrast Marxism, though still powerful, points to nothing outside of itself. Let us press on for the reformation of politics and law in the light of God’s word of redemption and reconciliation - the word of justice and hope.


Skillen’s critique identifies the terms Wolterstorff uses to explain his intention. “My project in this book is to ask how Christians should insert themselves into the modern social order” - “my call here is not for theorizing that emphasizes the theme of justice; it is for theorizing that places itself in the service of the cause of struggling for justice.” Skillen expresses sympathy, but draws attention to the author’s use of the term “insert”. Skillen comments - “[o]ne never “inserts” oneself into a social order.” This draws a bitter response from Wolterstorff but Wolterstorff’s theoretical exposition does not actually derive from
any transcendental critique of theoretical thought (a la Dooyeweerd) but would turn theory into a justice-supporting activity via a philosophical tour de force.

Skillen’s review of Wolterstorff’s “Kuyper lectures for 1981” at the Free University is constrained. Wolterstorff accuses Skillen of accusing him of being a “Johnny-come-lately”. In fact, given his critique of Wolterstorff’s book, he could, quite rightly have suggested that it still had too many characteristics of the “lone ranger” dabbling outside his own area of competence. But Skillen doesn’t attack in that way, although the review might have gained some greater coherence if this had been stated explicitly. Skillen critically evaluates Wolterstorff’s “critical realism” but then offers his comments from the standpoint of politic science. "My critical dialogue with him will concentrate on some of the dimensions and themes of the book most directly related to politics. The problem is that Wolterstorff, the reformed Kuyperian philosopher, presumes to be competent to make a scholarly contribution to the study of justice and peace. But his concepts are uncritically developed.” Skillen points that out politely. His review is an attempts to make some positive comments about a very disappointing book. The review does fully develop Skillen’s critique Wolterstorff’s scholarly problematic effort to address the issues of politics and economics in a reflective way but doesn’t contribute much to the way economic and political science deal with these concerns.


This is the 1984 Commencement Address at Dordt College by the former faculty member who taught there from 1978-1982. This is an earnest appeal, couched in humour and develops the refrain “Pray tell” from beginning to the final prayer. What’s the meaning, pray tell, of your graduation? Skillen asks these 1984 graduates. He points out that just as they have the dubious Orwellian distinction of graduating as the class of ’84, that he graduated 6/6/66. He reminds the class of Abraham - they will need the faith of Abraham in a life of one long pray tell before God’s face; the Ascension - Jesus drove them out into the world as God had driven Abraham out promising that he would send his Spirit to guide them; and to Augustine who cried out: Pray tell, is there not in this hour an end to my uncleanness and God taught him that the earth is simply God’s footstool. An address to encourage graduates to look for the sure coming of God’s Kingdom in what they do!


See “In dialogue for a distinctively Christian politics” PJR 8:3 December 1984. This is the first of three similarly produced typescripts reviewing important books for attention within APJ so that its work could flourish where growth was becoming possible. Later, APJ was to publish a series of “Background Papers” - a modest effort to push out the boundaries of political reflection by the association’s members.

This book is dubbed so outstanding that it should be discussed in some depth wherever a group of Christians gather for worship or conversation. There follows a suggestion for a better title. It is a significant contribution for Christian political responsibility in our day.

There is a “Summary and Overview” of the book’s five sections. Newbigin is seeking another model for understanding our world - not just the private world, but also the public world.

In the fourth section Skillen highlights the author’s three questions. The first concerns the preservation of “dogma” without degenerating into dogmatism. Then Skillen writes: the next two questions are of utmost importance and almost perfectly set the agenda for the Association for Public Justice. These are then quoted in full: “2. If the Christian revelation is to be taken as the framework for
understanding and action in the public sphere - in politics, economics and social organization - how can we avoid falling into the “Constantinian” trap? From one point of view the Enlightenment was part of Europe’s recoil from the horrible religious wars of the seventeenth century. Those wars marked the final break-up of the synthesis of Church, state and society which began with the baptism of the Emperor Constantine. Does my proposal amount to an invitation to return to the ideology of “Christendom”? 3. Does scripture in fact give us any authority for specifically Christian judgments and actions in the public sphere? (p.28)."

1985


See “Does Liberation Theology have a Christian Political Ethic?” PJR 8:4 Jan 1985. Bonino has been discussed previously in relation to his view of history and the unfolding of society and compared with Edmund Burke and Groen van Prinsterer (No.66) and in relation to liberation theology’s appropriation of Marxist methodology (No.68). One interesting facet of Bonino’s contribution is that he is a protestant among Roman Catholic theologians in South America espousing the “liberation theology” which was given its initial impetus by Gustavo Gutierrez. The title of the book under discussion indicates the possibility of Christian political ethics but the book displays the continuing dependency of Latin American theologians on European categories of political and social thought mixed with liberation rhetoric which does not reveal a sufficiently deep and distinctive Christian framework.

To begin his discussion paper, Skillen quotes Bonino’s opening orientation “‘politics’ [as] the sum total of all the relations that go to makeup life in a particular society” and then asks: why should I take ‘politics’ (even for a moment) to mean what he (or Aristotle) says it means? That way everything is viewed as having been politicized. Bonino may be wanting to show that Christians cannot escape from their public and political responsibilities but the reason is not that everything has actually become politicized but rather because part of life which we can never escape is the political world in which we live. Politics is not everything - it is not the ‘totality” of society - but it is integral and important to life.


In this ten page review, Skillen digs deep into Neuhaus’s well-known and frequently reviewed book. He pinpoints his own dis-satisfaction in these terms: At many points Neuhaus recognizes that ‘religion’ is somehow comprehensive and at the root of culture and politics. In other words, he believes that politics can never be treated properly if one assumes that it is disconnected from, or left untouched by, religion. At other points in his argument it is “culture” that refers to the more comprehensive reality. Thus he tends to promote the idea that religion is less than comprehensive, a function of something else, a factor dependent on something deeper. This leads, in Skillen’s view, quite logically, to Neuhaus’s low view of politics.

Skillen leads the reader through Neuhaus’s analysis of ersatz religion in the public and the civil religion consequences of the “Constantinian” approach. Hence Neuhaus promotes a modest and provisional politics avoiding an approach that would enforce God’s rule on others. From a political point of view, in fact, Neuhaus does not call for much that is different from what the secularists have
wanted, namely, a public arena in which no religion has the right of special place or the right of being imposed on others. He calls for little that is distinguishable from Enlightenment politics except that he wants to have the right to join with others in bearing witness to a sacred canopy that he believes covers our American experience. But then this is not just an appeal to making a nice spin on politics. Skillen sees Neuhaus taking a few decisive steps toward entering a religiously deep and politically contentious debate with those who fundamentally disagree with him about the nature of politics.


This review identifies the book as a collection of timely and highly readable materials on a subject bound to loom even larger in evangelical churches in the volatile days ahead (p.56). The review links the authors’ conservative restraint to their objective distance from the critical question of when to disobey the state even though they make it clear that Christians should be willing to disobey the state in order to remain faithful to God. Skillen suggests that the value of the book in its documentation of historical and biblical approaches to civil disobedience will be found when it is followed by another book that is more specific in evaluating the Christian’s use of civil disobedience as a means to an end. Furthermore, a “sequel” should try to answer some of the questions raised … but not answered. The book asserts that a Christian’s decision to disobey the government should be based on a Christian view of the State. But what exactly should that be? What is a just state, and how do we know when civil disobedience is called for? And if a government is legitimate and just, should not Christians promote change through legal means if they have the freedom to do so? The book apparently distinguishes “actual laws” from a “higher law”. Skillen develops the Christian political standpoint for justice in these terms: Should not Christians view the challenge to state law as coming from divine norms of justice calling unjust laws into question? He continues that it is not a tension between conscience and particular laws but actually between the demand that government rule justly and laws which promote injustice. The possibility of unjust laws raises the important question of Christians organizing not just to oppose unjust laws, but to render practical political service in many ways.


see No.98 above


If we don’t choose a lawyer in terms of appearance or a spouse in terms of an ability to cook why then do we vote for a candidate because of their stand on a single-issue or because of their appearance? This column discusses the well-entrenched American ambivalence about politics. We want Government and don’t want it at the same time. But Government exists to govern a political community and that public trust is real, requiring citizens and leaders to make wise decisions. The purpose and meaning of our public life in all the different private realms needs to be opened up and clarified in the understanding that Jesus is the King over all of it.


What this review illustrates is something of the difficulty of reviewing “Christian books” in a “Christian journal”. The potential for developing a reputation for “being critical” and “spotting weaknesses” in the contributions of other scholars
and academics is real. The kind of measured and restrained discussion of this review is not what could be expected when a seminar convenes. Such a review of a book, or a paper, with the author there in face-to-face discussion, is something different from the "confrontation" that takes place in the pages of a Christian academic journal or a Christian public interest magazine (see next item). Developing critical perspectives is an “occupational hazard”, something which Skillen could not completely avoid; he extends the discussion from the author’s admission that he was developing a “guess.” This way the critical exploration of the book respectfully acknowledges the importance for philosophers and theological graduates to think about justice and politics.


This too is a critical review. But it is not just a critical review of a “guess” or a theory, but of a critical evaluation of the federal welfare system. Murray’s book is a “real shocker”. The argument is not just that the antipoverty programs failed to eradicate poverty, but they actually made things worse. Murray, in Skillen’s view, has something of value to say and at the same does not have it quite right. The reason he doesn’t have it quite right is related to the fact that he hasn’t provided any basis for pursuing better federal social policies. Skillen notes a slightly mocking and condescending attitude in Murray’s analysis. He does not produce any evidence to prove that welfare policies create and reward laziness. A second major fault is his reliance upon “popular wisdom” over against “elite wisdom” of the welfare professionals. This too is an argument that lacks critical grounding.

The third flaw Skillen identifies is found in Murray’s view that a structuralist view of poverty has to give way to the older popular wisdom that the individual is responsible and must be held accountable by the government for his or her own behavior. This is an early analysis that would be further developed by the Center’s “Welfare Responsibility” project that was a central facet of Skillen’s work in the 1990s. The definitive CPJ response to the aforementioned crisis in welfare provision is found below in No.231 and No.250. In the latter, Stanley Carlson-Thies’s “Introduction: The American Welfare Policy Crisis: A Challenge to Christian Reflection” notes the cumulative record of ineffective and often counter-productive policies as well as the deep and wide disagreement about the purposes of welfare.


This is a discussion about the concept of law. The discussion begins with the final chapter of the book by Richard John Neuhaus The Naked Public Square (1984) in which the author discusses “law” (see here Skillen’s discussion No.106, No.116 and No.196). The fact that Neuhaus’s book appears so many times in Skillen’s review is indicative of his respect for its contribution.

At issue is Neuhaus’s apparent “high” view of law and his corresponding “low” view of politics and government. In this sense, Neuhaus’s rightful emphasis upon a “high” view of law, somehow disconnects the transcendent meaning of life as given by God from the fullness of created reality.


The heading is “Roar of a Mouse” which light-heartedly refers to the quote given from Tutu’s analysis of American (Reaganite) supposed “neutrality” with respect to the dismantling of apartheid. The book is about Christian vision and endurance, about confidence in God who wants to lead us along paths of righteousness.
In conclusion Skillen confides: “The book reaches a climax in chapter 4, with the record of Bishop Tutu’s response to the Eloff Commission set up by the government in 1982 to investigate activities of the South African Council of Churches. I have not read a more powerful Christian testimony given before government authorities since the apostle Paul’s before Felix, Festus and Agrippa (Acts 24-26). Read this book; be encouraged in your faith; and give thanks to God for Desmond Tutu.”

114. “In ... the World” CLSQ VI: 2, 22,24.

This article challenges the widespread assumption among Christians which effectively replaces the humanistic view of self-sufficiency with a view that assumes that only Christians are self-sufficient. Would the country be better off with more Christians elected to public office? Skillen says If Christians who have no talent for public life end up filling public offices, then the results could be very bad indeed. A general confession of faith in Christ does not qualify one for public office. This does NOT mean that one’s faith is necessarily private. Rather it means a willingness to follow Jesus by obeying him in all things - by keeping God’s commandments, bearing fruit to God’s glory.


The truly interesting thing about this article, written in anticipation of the November summit meeting between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, is not its historical context, although it is of some interest to see Skillen’s political views developing alongside developments on the wider and larger international stage. The article encapsulates the importance Skillen gives to re-discovering the validity of “just war” reasoning. Having outlined the historical situation that had made the Reagan- Gorbachev summit inevitable, Skillen summarises the criteria for developing “just defense” which he had expounded previously [No.75 (JASA), No.87 (Banner), No.98 (APJ position paper)].

But here we have a viewpoint that explains why “just war” criteria are not being embraced by the “common sense” driven American population, let alone Christians, still less reformed Christians. Over the past three or four centuries, under the impact of modern nationalism and a growing faith in science and technology, these “just war” criteria have gradually diminished in the public conscience. And thus the world witnessed Nazism, Japanese imperialism and Soviet communism, the dreadful ending to world war II, and the decades-long strategy of nuclear deterrence. Among other things, the newly discovered yet frightening nuclear approach was cheaper in the short run, because the deployment of those weapons was less expensive than equipping hundreds of thousands of military personnel in the field with modern conventional weapons.... Today, even in the West, “just war” thinking has been largely displaced by military relativism, which says that "anything goes" so long as our good cause is better than their bad cause.


See below No.143.

In this article, Skillen develops the theme of biblical obedience as a Christian speaking to other Christians. The discussion begins with an outline of what it means to accept Biblical Revelation as Normative and places his own view over against those who would absolutize Old Testament experiences, laws and customs as the “model” for a contemporary state.

Aware of ongoing attempts to “insert” the Bible into American politics, he rejects the notion that the Bible gives any support to the idealization of the US
Constitution as a “revelatory” document, nor does he think that biblical prophecy allows one to fit the modern states of Israel and the United States into a grand scheme for the end times in order to concoct foreign policy out of a supposedly special knowledge (gnosis) of God’s hidden will.

The positive alternative is given in Biblical Revelation and the Unfolding of Modern History and continues with a discussion of The Bible, Politics, and the Reality of Creation Order. Skillen explains the error of Rousseau in the Social Contract A person’s citizenship is not the essence of his humanity. Politics and Sin is discussed and then an explanation of American Democracy and Biblical Obedience to Justice.

The essay concludes with a discussion of The Necessity of an Integral Approach to Political Responsibility which includes critical comments on Neuhaus’s “low” view of politics (discussed in No. 106). Skillen has taken the opportunity of involvement in Fr Neuhaus’s seminar to expound “principled pluralism” and its biblical basis, as well as to advocate the kind of public involvement that serves in the political arena, to promote a Christian view of politics.


See below No.134.


See No.132, No.133, No.134, No.137. This is a comment on the Supreme Court’s ruling in a case that considered schools in Grand Rapids and New York.

In both cases the Court ruled the programs unconstitutional because they “entangle” the government too much in “religion” and therefore violate the clause of the First Amendment that prohibits the “establishment” of any religion.

Skillen’s opinion on this opinion is that the Court is simply confirming a long-held prejudice in the American legal system based on the notion that religiously based schooling is somehow private and “public” rights and privileges are rightly denied to “private” institutions (i.e., those schools that are not prepared to deny, cloak or publicly repudiate their actual religious motivation).


As people are trying to come to terms with earthquakes, droughts, famines and floods - so-called natural disasters - Skillen draws attention to this book which places these calamities in a broader global context.

The authors, from the Swedish Red Cross and the international Institute for Environment and Development, attempt to show the correlation between social, political and economic decision-making and these disasters.

These “natural disasters” are increasingly manmade, the authors claim. “Most disaster problems are unsolved development problems. Disaster prevention and mitigation is thus primarily an aspect of development.”

Says Skillen:

“While Christians might be disappointed that the book contains no biblical exposition and no theological reflection on the providence of God, they should read this little paperback carefully for what it helps us to understand about the nature of human responsibility in the world.”

This is a slightly expanded version of No. 119. It concludes in this way: The next time you discover water in your basement or see starving children on the evening news, don’t ask God, “Why?” as if he were solely responsible. Ask in faith what God would have us do to alleviate suffering, to re-design housing codes, to enforce zoning laws, to improve international development efforts, and to end both legal carelessness and illegal fraudulence so that the “acts of man” can become “acts of mercy” rather than “acts of negligence and injustice”.

121. Review of Richard Wightman Fox’s Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography


[This review appears side by side with Ronald Nash’s review of Humberto Belli Breaking Faith 1985 about the Sandanista National Liberation Front rule in Nicaragua.] Richard Fox’s outstanding biography is must reading for those who want to understand the proper role of Christian social and political action in America today… Not only does Reinhold Niebuhr come alive to the reader, but the American and international contexts of his life are detailed in fascinating ways. Fox’s biography has raised important interpretative questions about a thoroughgoing liberal’s struggle with modern liberalism.

Skillen highlights H Richard’s loving criticism of his brother’s liberalism which he called “first aid to hypocrisy”.

Biblically rooted political and social thinking cannot ignore Niebuhr; but it must go beyond him and around him in a very self-critical fashion.


This is a discussion document prepared for a conference “Choice in Education” held at the School of education of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, April 29 1986. There are five theses and the fifth is divided into 6 sub-points:

1. Parents are the “principals” in education; 2. Parental principalship provides a basis by which all schools, state and non-state can be treated with equity; 3. Such pluralistic, proportionate and equitable treatment has nothing to do with establishing religion. Equitable treatment of all school systems is the only way to safeguard against establishing one or other religion in a state-established school system that favours one public philosophy at the expense of others deemed “necessarily private”; 4. The government should be concerned with the “public justice” dimension of education - non-discrimination, support for handicapped, society-wide spreading of costs, “truth in advertising” and special regard for needy and new migrants: 5. Schools may stay outside the public system if they choose; each school should be ascribed freedom to define and work from its own philosophy of education; the state should oversee accreditation and the setting of standards for competency; there should be freedom in employment and the setting of minimum standards for teacher accreditation; schools should be open to children who want to attend them; no additional tuition should be charged although schools can raise their own funds.


This interview provides information to a broad range of CRCNA members who have some connection, as a financial supporter or otherwise, with APJ. So there is discussion of farm policy and how APJ goes about making its contribution. “APJ does not ask, ‘How can we react to the farm problem within the present policy framework?’ Rather, it asks some prior questions: ‘What is the full problem?
What are its causes? What role has government played in creating the problem? What are government’s responsibilities now? What fundamental structural changes are needed?” The article also discusses APJ’s work in education and tuition vouchers. The discussion refers to APJ’s work with Roman Catholics and Citizens for Educational Freedom. Those fighting vouchers take for granted the government’s monopoly of education and don’t talk about justice for schools, families and children but simply take for granted government’s current monopoly over funding and control of schools. The interview also ranges over voting and electoral reform, abortion (see also No.147), and concludes with a brief application of the biblical teaching of office to the many simultaneous responsibilities of people in contemporary society. He appeals to readers to work together as Christian citizens.

124. “Christian Service is Not a Parachurch Activity” CLSQ 7:2 Summer, 18.

Such action is not “alongside” or “beside” anything. It is inside the reality of being God’s people in His world. A version of this, “Christian Political Action is not a Parachurch Activity”, was also printed as an APJ broadsheet for its own members. This simple discussion explains the terms “para-” and “para-church”. Today there is a host of organizations and activities generally referred to by the designation “para-church” including independent evangelistic and mission organizations, publications, youth clubs, and dozens more.


This is a very interesting review also for what it reveals about the interlinkages within the “reformational” movement in North America. Ms O’Donovan was a student of Professor Herbert Richardson and later Skillen was to contribute to a book of essays honouring Ms O’Donovan’s husband (see No.324). Ms O’Donovan also wrote on George Grant in a festschrift in honour of Bernard Zylstra (1934-1986) which also included Skillen’s essay (an abridged version of No.156 and can be found at No.235). Skillen concludes with the observation that Ms O’Donovan’s conclusion does not actually go far enough in expounding how Grant’s Christian basis shows itself in his work. One can hope that Joan O’Donovan will go on to another book where she will unfold her own Christian political philosophy in further dialogue with John Hallowell, Herman Dooyeweerd, Eric Vögelin, Reinhold Niebuhr, and other twentieth-century notables.

126. “Don’t Just Do Something; Sit There!” CLSQ 7:3 Fall, 31-32.

This takes its cue from the book by William Lee Miller The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic Alfred Knopf (1986) (Skillen’s review is No.139) The biggest failure of the WASPs, according to Miller, was that they did not have a social and political philosophy that admitted, or criticized, what they were doing. Says Skillen: The characteristic contribution of American religion to American civic understanding therefore has been not perspective, wisdom, nor depth of insight, but the rousing of the sentiments and energies for particular acts of charity, generosity, and social reform. Hence Skillen is using his report on Miller’s book to justify pointing his readers in a different direction. Instead of “Don’t just sit there! Do something!” he is building a case for “Don’t just do something! Sit there!” Precisely now, therefore, we must be able to assess our circumstances with a critical historical and philosophical mindset.


See No.167.
1987


See below No. 170.

This article draws on what Skillen had written in No.109 where the need for a Christian public philosophy is set forth against the background of the well-entrenched American ambivalence about politics. America wants Government and doesn’t want it at the same time. It is in anticipation of the 1988 election campaign that Skillen advocates the need for a biblically based public philosophy that orient us toward proper service in our American republic - the res publica (public thing). This is set forth with a recognition of the growth in evangelical political contributions via such figures as Falwell, Robinson, Colson, Carter and Hatfield. A general moralism or legalism is of no help here. We need to understand the type of morality and legality that is specifically appropriate to the political community.


This is one contribution to the Theological Forum ”Called to Witness to the Gospel Today”. Paul G Schrotenboer, editor, described the contents as “communal testimony in one or other area of life”, a zonal Kingdom approach. The two page article explains APJ as an independent association of citizens who confess Christ’s lordship over the whole earth. ... we believe that even civic life is called to repentance and renewal by Jesus Christ. The Association has a 3-pronged character: policy research; direct government influence; civic education and mobilization. The parable of the wheat and the tares is part of the rationale.

130. “A Bicentennial to Open Our Eyes to the World” CLSQ 8:1 Winter, 31.

The article’s major point is found in the words with which it concludes: Yes, let’s joyfully celebrate our Constitution’s bicentennial this year. Let’s also seek to make a Christian contribution to the understanding and strengthening of constitutional justice wherever possible, both here and abroad. The way Skillen draws attention to the American celebration of its own constitution is by drawing attention to the structural tensions that are manifest in societies over their constitutions and the interpretation thereof. This article encourages Americans to deeper reflection in their bicentennial celebration. By what standards should we evaluate [a constitution’s] relative strengths and weaknesses, its relative justice and injustice? What is a just state? What is good basic law? Why should states be fundamentally limited and defined by a constitution? From whence come higher standards of law and justice?


In the “Political Science Commentary”, presumably written by Heie and Wolfe (pp.15-16), Skillen’s approach is described as “less pluralistic” than that of the other contributor, Richard Mouw. “Mouw’s essay reflects a greater tolerance for compatibility between existing ways of doing political science and the Christian faith.” Quite apart from the actual content of Mouw’s essay this judgment already fuses pluralism with tolerance, and to define tolerance with compatibility between existing ways of doing political science and Christian faith. It also assumes implicitly that what Skillen presents as political science is an ideal and not an “existing way of doing political science.”

The essay begins with Karl Deutsch’s positivistic and Hobbesian approach to the study of political systems. It then moves on, having shown how taken-for-
granted assumptions leave discussion about the responsibility of government and other social institutions to one side in the interest of understanding “system integration” in conceptual terms - i.e. according to Talcott Parsons’ pattern variables or the AGIL schema - adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency. All of that proceed with much analytical and conceptual complexity but the nature of the political community to be considered by political science has not been clarified. To say that society is complex is no explanation.

After setting forth some theses about what a Christian approach would involve by way of contrast with such “prestigious” approaches, including the Christian political philosophy of Niebuhr, any Christian approach should approach politics with a very clear and unambiguous assertion about God’s sovereignty and the creation’s meaningfulness. Skillen acknowledges Yoder’s recognition of the God-ordained, God-revealed normativity to which we are truly subject as Christians (p.28 fn 23). His appeal is to the creation order, as the basis of politics and the basis from which political science as a study of creation becomes possible. Christian confession of creational heteronomy stands over against any other starting point for political science in human autonomy. The discussion proceeds with further elucidation of the place of the political community - Government and citizenry - in the context of the cultural mandate. It concludes with a brief outline of how a Christian political contribution relates to the Graeco-Roman, Roman Catholic and Humanistic political heritage in the west.

132. “Wrong Question” (comment on Judge W Brevard Hand’s Alabama textbook decision) Reformed Journal April, 4-5.

See No.137 below. This is a guest editorial and as such the discussion draws attention to the views put forward in the editorial of the Washington Post of March 6 about Judge W Brevard Hand’s decision in the Alabama textbook case. The Post had charged that the judgment was eccentric and “wacko”. Skillen’s contribution is aimed at assisting readers of the Reformed Journal look past the newspaper and media controversy and to see the problem in its historical context.

133. “Justice for Education” CLSQ 8:2 Spring, 31.

Another article discussing education in a constitutional and legal context. The simplicity of the federal Constitution was partly made possible because the ongoing role of state governments in many aspects of society, such as education, family life and voluntary associations could be taken for granted. But times had changed and for justice in education to be done the entire national scene needs to be kept in view. Reference is made to Disestablishment a Second Time (No.80). The growing tensions over education need to be resolved by a fundamental change in the legal and political structure of schooling. The mistaken assumption that Government should monopolize schooling needs to be abandoned.


See No. 117. This article deals with the same material that is dealt with in the Amicus Curiae (see No 137). As indicated (see No 133) it is an “update” of Disestablishment a Second Time (No 76), an attempt to develop pertinent historical and philosophical insights about the ongoing legal and constitutional problems concerning the control of primary and secondary schools.

Whereas other countries have had long experience of “church controlled” public education, Skillen begins the article by specifying the shape of the assumptions undergirding the predominant public policies that have emerged in the United States.
Two assumptions are evident in the history of American education. The first is that the government of a city or state holds the primary and direct responsibility for educating its citizens. The second assumption recognizes the primacy of parental authority in the education of children.

By noting the ongoing tension between these two assumptions, Skillen can begin to explore the history, ancient and modern, of the tensions between them. The article does not defend "religion" in education. The point of the article is to bring the discussion back to the first and most important question of who has what kind of responsibility for education.

The essay is "visionary" and seeks to stress that it is an argument about the principle of public justice for education. I will have achieved my purpose here if I do nothing more than to point the way to overcoming the injustices now being suffered by families, schools, and many citizens within the majoritarian system of government-controlled schooling.


These are two books published in 1986 in the general field of political science which will give the British magazine’s readers some idea of the way in which political discourse unfolds on the other side of the North Atlantic. One is on foreign policy (Hamilton) and the other on social welfare (Schorr and Comer). Schorr’s “old liberal” perspective, says Skillen, is part of the explanation of why the Ronald Reagan “revolution” could turn the clock back so far with respect to social welfare. The book is also based on the same reactionary dream of an almost undifferentiated national community. As such it represents an alternative to the Reagan mythology on the same assumptions.


Here is Skillen’s definitive statement on the Reagan presidency. A careful and measured exposé of Reagan’s “pragmatic nationalism” is published here one year before the 1988 election. The article begins thus: The signs and signals might at first appear to be unconnected, but they are not. The Iran-contra scandal shakes Washington. Reagan’s loose administrative style finally comes up for examination. The lack of a coherent US foreign policy becomes the target of increasing criticism. The trade and budget deficits worsen. The President’s considerable popularity begins to evaporate. What is going on in Washington? The article explores Reagan’s ideology, his strategy, his failures and the outcome in terms of the fallen idols that result from the false blend of Christian and pagan symbols into an uncritical nationalism.

137. with Steve West Brief Amicus Curiae of the Association for Public Justice, 11th Circuit Court of Appeals No. 87-7216 Smith et al vs Hunt et al May 4.

See No. 132 above. This is a “Brief Amicus Curiae of the Association for Public Justice”. The counsel was Stephen West, who re-drafted Skillen’s article and put it into appropriate legal format for presentation to the court of Judge Hon W Brevard Hand, Chief Judge, the United States District Court for the Southern District of Alabama.

“The Amicus submits that oral argument would be appropriate and useful in this case because of the novel and complex legal issues involved and the voluminous factual record but, however, recognizes that it has no right to participate in said argument under the rules of this Court.”
138. “Christians: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?” CLSQ 8:4 Summer, 27.

One of the motivations for Skillen’s involvement in the CLSQ newsletter is to encourage the development of Christian lawyers. The idea is not just to promote the idea that one can be a lawyer and a Christian at the same time; it is to encourage the practise of law as a Christian vocation. This is summed up nicely in the conclusion to this article: What will you say to your children about this dark American hour? What evidence will your law practice show that you are part of the solution and not simply part of the problem? Remember, your actions will speak louder than your words! Skillen addresses Christian lawyers to keep on doing what Christian lawyers are called to do. Skillen is not just talking to citizens or politicians. He is addressing legal professionals. A republic cannot be reformed apart from action by citizens prepared to serve their civic neighbours through laws and policies that do justice to all. Political renewal requires political action. Legal reform requires wise jurisprudential acts and judgments. No shortcuts are available. Nothing human automatically takes care of itself. Thus the appeal is made to lawyers in the distinctive integrity of their own profession for which all Christians, as fellow workers of the body of Christ, are also responsible.


(see No.126) Skillen commends the writer of “this wonderfully written book” and notes that Miller writes as one who can see how religion shaped the First Amendment of the US Constitution, and then also made an impact upon the entire country. The book is an exploration of the historical origins, development and ambiguities of the idea that the founding of America was all about religious liberty. Skillen briefly describes the book’s exciting and intriguing narrative of four parts and the remaining two-thirds is Skillen’s explanation of the American “religion” problem. He goes on to spell out the consequences of Miller’s failure to explore the ambiguity of the word “religion”. His observation at this point is contentious and only partly elaborated. It might read as a political critique of an historical treatise. But he is wanting to sharpen the discussion of religious freedom so that it be distinguished from neutrality.

The staunch commitment to separation of church and state that some of us hold is rooted in our religious view of what a state ought to be. And such a view is just as religious as the ambiguous notion that religious freedom is neutrality. In this country we have actually forced into exile contrary views held by those who wish to establish a single church or to force the end of free debate. Miller has shown how America is rooted in part in Christianity, and done a marvellous job showing how the separation of church and state came about. But he has left the question of how competing religions, with different orientations to life and society, can all be treated justly in a pluralistic state.

140. “By This We Know Love: World Hunger Devotionals for Grades 9-12” prepared by Mary Hoogendoorn Hoekstra, Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, Grand Rapids MI.


This is a bible study, a biblical justification for Skillen’s belief that God’s mandate to do justice, and not simply to wish for it, is an integral part of the daily Christian life. In Matthew 5:20 Jesus was directing his disciples to pursue justice. And who is this Jesus? This is no defeated idealist who has left us to remember Him as a great teacher of private ethics. Jesus is Lord and King now. As the One
who conquered sin and calls us to be joint heirs of His Kingdom, He demands justice. This is more than mere ethical responsibility.

Doing justice is an inextricable part of being in fellowship with God and knowing Him. Jeremiah 22:15-16 is expounded and readers are reassured by the teaching that it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ - not our own - that saves us. To ignore the call to justice is not merely to fail in loving our neighbours, it is also to endanger our relationship with Christ. We are called to a life of doing the will of God (Matthew 7:21). To affirm our allegiance to God without obeying His commands is to engage in deep deceit (I Jn 2:3-6).

Pursuing justice must be the hallmark of our lives ... God and His mandates are realities of far greater weight than anything else we encounter in our daily work.. Encouraging one another to fulfill these commands is far more than idealistic rhetoric; it is one step toward being in the world but not of it.


This article is an exposition of Thomas Jefferson’s religious view of life. In an ordered and sequential way, Skillen begins by discussing Jefferson’s positive view of bible reading as background to Jefferson’s religious vision that a common core of moral truth exists and can be counted on to sustain social life. His religion of republican morality was a faith in its own dogmatic essentials. This is the underlying vision that has shaped education in the American republic. And this is also the basis upon which our public school system is the equivalent of an established church, teaching the correct moral dogmas and view of life to all children.


See No.116 above.


(Translated by CDV editors from “Life After Reagan” PJR Dec 1987).

This Dutch language article begins: Ronald Reagan has made a forceful impression upon the United States. During his period of office the President has had to oversee great problems which have brought dark clouds rather than brighter days to his country. It still remains to be seen what good his successors can make of all these. Written for a Dutch audience in Christen Democratische Appel partij newsletter, the discussion begins with a typical comment on the Reagan presidency from Time magazine. The views of William Schneider and Hugh Heclo are surveyed, with the start of America’s third century in view.


A translation in two parts of the article “Kuyper was on time and ahead of his time” No.154 below, 15-17, 17-19.


Reprint from No.45 and No.73.
See No. 91. No. 95. Skillen has maintained his “principled pluralist” view of abortion in his articles in this church magazine over the years. Here he reviews developments with respect to abortion legislation 15 years after Roe v. Wade. Summarizing the views of Dennis J Horan et al. Abortion and the Constitution: Reversing Roe v Wade Through the Courts (1987) Skillen notes: Justice Blackmun, who wrote for the majority in that case, produced a highly debatable opinion. He misinterpreted history. He dictated a meaning for “person” that is without legal or logical foundation. He proclaimed a “right to privacy” that cannot be inferred from the language of the United States constitution. In addition, the court tried to set limits on the state’s interest in maternal and fetal health that will never remain fixed because of constant changes in medical technology. The main driver of abortion “rights” is a desire to liberate women from the burdens of unwanted pregnancies... Skillen outlines the three legal principles that give support to abortion: a woman’s right to privacy is understood to be broad enough to include her right to terminate; the unborn is not a person according to the Constitution; a denial of the state’s interest in maternal and fetal health, when it comes to restrictions on abortion. He then gives the outline of a strategy which respects the judicial court process, understands the social and political context and makes a thorough use of medical technology. Those who want to help Americans kick the habit of abortion should pull together for the long haul to pursue this multifaceted legal, political, and social strategy. Christians, who are supposed to be experts at perseverance in the pursuit of their high calling of love for neighbours, should be leading the way!

This is “Platform Plank #5”, which presumably was part of an Eternity attempt to promote Christian thinking in an election year. The one page article discuss God’s purpose for humankind - to be the steward of the earth. God owns everything and gives us the resources and responsibilities for productive stewardship.Three basic principles follow:

1. to keep God’s gifts one should adopt a productive rather than a possessive posture;

2. meaningful work should guide consumption. Skillen reiterates this in these terms: God has given us many good things to eat and use and enjoy. But Paul tells Timothy that we ought to be satisfied with enough and should not be trying constantly to possess or consume more than enough...

3. God’s purpose for His image is full maturation. So that each is able to serve God and neighbour freely. This gives a principled basis for so-called free enterprise. In conclusion, Skillen suggests that God’s ownership and human stewardship points us toward an economy that aims for productivity by mature and independent people who are free to develop and employ their talents because they have access to widely dispersed capital and economic opportunity.

See No.141 of which this is an expanded version. Seeking public service is one dimension of Christian service which belongs to the community of his disciples. This act of service constitutes an obligation to be sure, but one that we should accept gladly as servants who relish the goodness of life in communion with the Righteous One.
150. **Candidate Profiles: A Look at the Leading Presidential Contenders**
Editor with Introduction, Zondervan, 5-15.

The Introduction is titled: “The Republic’s Highest Office: Will Justice Rule?” In a brief 10 page essay Skillen explains the structural political context in which voting for president takes place. We need a person who accepts the mandate to seek justice for the republic in all of its domestic complexity. We should seek as president one who is able to guide both government and citizens in an era of ever-increasing dynamism at the international level. In short, we need a political team leader with a public philosophy adequate to guide his team wisely and patiently through crises as well as routines in the pursuit of public justice.

The discussion moves through various sections: “Trying to see through the confusion and conflict” and then “Facing up to the future”. A discussion of the terms “Liberalism, Conservatism and Pragmatism” follows explaining why Reagan's anti-government ideology was bound to run out of steam. The discussion explores “Going Beyond Pragmatism to Principled Politics,” discussing “The Future of the United States in an Interdependent World”, with “A New Vision of International Responsibility”. In conclusion, Skillen calls on readers to pray according to the vision presented by Job (29:1, 7-17).

151. **“Lame Ducks, Paper Tigers and Real Power” CLSQ Spr, 28-29.**

This column is written with the 1988 presidential election in view. Skillen, the former professor of political science, knows that political discussion, in all venues, is about power, and he also knows that very often the assumptions about power in human life make it very difficult to make headway in the sense of developing principled perspectives on public justice. So as the title indicates he discusses lame ducks - a lame duck no longer possesses the full power of a healthy duck - and paper tigers to give some perspective on the mystery of power that is held as much by those whose power is waning as by the up-and-comers. God is the source of all power and authority. He gives it to whom He will. Nations rise and fall; kings come and go... but in view of God's power, every earthly leader is a paper tiger or a lame duck. Power is built and thus it is temporary, ephemeral, belonging permanently to no human creature of institution. The discussion encourages readers to think more about how power should be used, rather than remaining fixated upon who has it. When power is dispersed throughout the world, then it may be less likely that any single country will be able to dominate all the others. The column is another in which Skillen encourages readers to consider the fact that all power and earthly authority is subject to God Himself and any office or power we have has been granted us by God Himself. Lame Ducks come and go, but the creator of all ducks, the Lord of all tigers and the King of all human beings will remain forever. His power will know no end.

152. **“A Consensus in Need of a Philosophy” This World Spring, 136-139 (review of Michael Novak et al. The New Consensus on Family and Welfare: A Community of Self Reliance American Enterprise Institute, 1987).**

Around this time, in Public Justice Report and in his other writings, Skillen’s emphasis was upon the need for a “public philosophy”. Much later in 2004 (see No.341 - pp.68-75) Skillen was to outline his view that maybe the US welfare policy was evolving toward a “fourth order of pluralism.” This review is important because it identifies the importance of keeping abreast with contemporary reflection within public policy if one is to develop an alternative approach. Having summarised the helpful contribution of the book, and placing its analysis in the context of four major reports that had been issued since 1986, Skillen observes, This book is highly valuable in providing a summary of the “new consensus” - the emerging common denominator on which many people now agree. It is a well-
written digest not only of a discussion held within one seminar but of a nationwide debate that has been going on for five or ten years. At one point the open-ended pragmatism of the report is commended, and shows a proper humility by not suggesting that it has all the answers for those engaged in welfare service. That being said, several important questions arise, however, from a reading of this book. Why should we have confidence in the further pragmatic efforts of policy makers simply because a new consensus may be emerging among many conservatives and liberals? A consensus existed back when the war on poverty began, and look where that led us. If the problems of poverty are deeply related to a variety of cultural conditions and institutions to which government has not given sufficient attention in the past, has the Working Seminar perhaps underemphasized this reality in the process of articulating its consensual conclusions? Is it possible, in other words, that the book exudes too much optimism by virtue of the very fact that it highlights a consensus without saying enough about the great cultural odds which still face efforts to overcome poverty? Skillen explains further why the approach is deficient: Without an argument about the nature and responsibility of different institutions in society (government, families, schools, churches etc) the book’s recommendations and conclusions seem far too inconsequential - perhaps no more than expressions of hopefulness. The criticism appeals therefore to the empirical reality of a society in which a plurality of responsibilities face us all. Somehow in the social scientific analysis of this reality this plurality is reduced and the full consequences of this investigation of poverty is thereby avoided.


Of note is the difference between the way Skillen approaches the historical background to his own effort to promote public justice and that of Harry Antonides, his “reformational” colleague from Canada. Skillen summarizes the book in terms of Antonides’ concern to expose the radical subjectivism of liberal Christianity and its roots in the social gospel movement. It is a helpful sketch of some key ideas held by prominent social gospel advocates. One might say that Antonides is preoccupied more with showing the theological inadequacy of Social Gospel liberalism than with uncovering the worthwhile and negative social consequences of the movement. Skillen suggests that helpful insight may have been gained by comparing and contrasting the efforts of the Social Gospel movement with Antonides’s efforts with the Christian Labour Association of Canada.

The Biggar et al book is intended as an illustration of pluralist dialogue between religions. It is a collection from a 1982 Chicago Divinity School conference. Skillen’s comments indicate that he views this book is a helpful beginning but it does not advance the cause of pluralist dialogue.

154. “Kuyper was on Time and Ahead of his Time” _RES Theological Forum_ XVI:2 June, 15-19.

This is the English version of No.145. It is subtitled “an essay on religion as a way of life and societal differentiation”. Kuyper is discussed in terms of his Christian willingness to confront the complex differentiation of society across the globe as well as the spiritual confrontation between different religious viewpoints. Skillen outlines his own background saturated by a personalistic pietism that dominated our evangelical/fundamentalist subculture. By reading Kuyper he began to see that God’s sovereignty over all of life, over all of the creation order,
Kuyper was “on time” because he led European Calvinists in his day to grasp the significance of what was happening economically, politically, and intellectually in Europe. He was “ahead of his time” because the culturally formative action he urged Christians to take in politics, education, scholarship, and economic life anticipated the kind of action that is now essential beyond the boundaries of Holland and Europe and the entire Western world.

The discussion then moves to “The Meaning of Religion” - the unifying power that controls a person’s or a people’s life in all of its various dimensions. Skillen notes that this idea of religion is foreign to the liberal humanistic west which has difficulty understanding the significance and power of a reviving Islam. Then he moves on to “The Differentiation of Society” with the observation that around the world today cries for solidarity and integration are stronger than those for differentiation..... nothing less than a profound and comprehensive Christian vision of society is adequate for authentic and vital Christianity today. Anything less than a comprehensive vision of Christ transforming culture in all its creational diversity will lead Christians away from the truth of God’s sovereignty over history. Skillen concludes by affirming that Kuyper helped spark a revival that involves serving God with all our strength in every sphere of life.


See No.51 and No.71. In this chapter Skillen reverts to the introduction in the Pro Rege article (1979) which had been omitted in the beginning of Chapter 3 of International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice (1981) (No.71) with a change in emphasis. By uncovering the assumptions about this issue we will be able to gain substantial insight into the contemporary science(s) of international politics and, thereby, be able to clarify the relevance of a specifically Christian contribution to this field.

By way of conclusion, Skillen brings his material together in a way that also differs from what is presented in the book. Now he is keen to contribute to reflection upon the “disciplinary tension” that is ancient, antedating both the rise of the modern state and the emergence of contemporary social science research methods. In the conclusion he asks: Is it possible to bring together the theoretical efforts of Morgenthau, Deutsch, and Keohane and Nye into a larger political scientific project guided by a Christian view of the world? It should be possible but it is going to require a larger vision and great effort.


Skillen is concerned with the “distinctive integrity” of political science as a discipline. He begins this article by alerting the reader to the diversity of answers that will be forthcoming if an inquirer is wanting to know about the current state of the discipline. And so the article is also an attempt to give a Christian analysis of the current position and prospects of political science within the scientific enterprise. In this connection we can see Skillen’s view of the political science discipline and understand why he is not overly impressed with the praxis-oriented scholarship of Nicholas Wolterstorff. In the previous exchange between them, Wolterstorff complained that Skillen had written about his work as if he were a “Johnny-come-lately” to social, economic and political analysis. The implication is that Skillen has responded in a territorial and possessive way as if one who has gained his qualifications in the political science arena cannot accept the contribution of a philosopher. But equally clearly, Wolterstorff’s reply to
Skillen shows he is unaware of the stand he is taking within political theory... Skillen simply fails to grapple with the issue I was raising. I was asking, What should be the basic unit of our social analysis? The standard answer in liberal social science is that the basic unit is a society - meaning by “a society”, a pretty much self-sufficient social system. The world as a whole is then seen as a large array of such self-sufficient social systems which interact with each other in various ways.” (see No.102 and Wolterstorff’s reply Reformed Journal 34:12 December 1984 pp.26-27). The article is geared to promote Christian consideration of this nest of problems: Christian scholarship in the future must come to grips with all three of these drives. In doing so it should seek to distinguish itself by non-reductionism (with respect to the third point), by an integrally Christian philosophy of science (with respect to point two), and by an empirical comprehensiveness that shows the relationship among all the functions and institutions of political life which have thus far become historically differentiated (with respect to the first point) (p.38).

A brief outline of the history of political theory is given (pp.38-45) moving through ancient, medieval, and early modern phases up until late in the 19th century. What then follows is a 10 page section “Issues of Strategic Concern for a Christian Orientation in Political Science.”

This is set out in terms of three basic questions: 1. What is the ‘political’? Political science, I would argue, is a multifunctional entity science not a monofunctional or modal science. That is to say, it is a science aiming to understand things (entities) called states (or political communities) which are distinguishable from other kinds of “things”. 2. What constitutes a science of politics. In this section Skillen also provides an argument which gives a basis for statistical studies of political behavior, and for comparative sociological analysis of political institutions, and for cybernetic analysis of information “flows” through government to society and back again. It is the empirical reality of states and inter-state relations that is the rightful focus for political science. 3. Political Science and Public Life Skillen notes the recent development in policy analysis and in this context examines Wolterstorff’s “praxis-oriented” scholarship. In conclusion he states we should seek to connect an ever more accurate and comprehensive theory of real political life with the non-theoretical responsibilities we have as citizens, so that both can be more fully informed by the other, each in its own sphere.

157. “Step into My Office” CLSQ Summer, 29

This is a brief exposition of the biblical idea of office. In the broadest sense “offices” are the varieties of duties and responsibilities to which God calls us with our diverse talents. Skillen develops a viewpoint that implicitly exposes the fallacy of some widespread presuppositions about life held by Christians. Because this world is not in arbitrary chaos, its historical shape does not arise from us ex nihilo. We can only shape what the Creator gives us to shape. Families, schools, governments and business enterprises take on particular shapes because everything that we do is a creaturely response to the multiple arenas of human accountability God created for us.

158. “Jesse and Pat Ride Out” Third Way Aug., 20-22

Most Christians in America are satisfied that their political responsibility can be fulfilled through the ordinary “secular” processes of the two-party system. Nevertheless, in recent years, many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have come to desire something more. “More” has meant stepped-up involvement in moral- issue crusades against abortion, for prayer in schools, against pornography, and for stronger defense. “More” also shows up in a greater desire to promote people for public office who openly confess their Christian faith. Jesse Jackson stands in the “prophetic/liberationist” stream. His campaign is analysed
in terms of the inner dilemmas which derive from viewing America as an undifferentiated community of hope for the better life. Robertson on the other hand identifies the American political system as that which is wanted by the majority of God-fearing, Judaeo-Christian Americans who are the proper owners of this estate that God gave their ancestors back at the time of the Revolution. The secular humanists are those who have sneaked in and laid false claim to the (Christian and moral) liberties that America provides. Both "Christian" candidates represent a Christian civil-religious ideology albeit from differing angles.

159. “The Gift of Administration” CLSQ Fall, 26

This is a continuation of the discussion "Step into my office!" (see No.157).

An administrator is a steward of people and things but such a steward neither creates nor dominates.

Service, care, ministering - these are indeed what humble administration is all about. A steward has the power of giving names to things and people. These names identify uses and talents. ... it begins and ends with identifying the needs and expectations of the institution or office that one administers... Some Christian organizations try to do all things for all people and end up failing to do anything well. Administration is a gift, a humble service to help people lift up to God the talents and resources He has given to His creatures. Through faithful administration, Christians can help humanity understand Who really runs this world and how the ultimate Administrator wants the world to serve Him.


In many senses this is a summary of No.150 where the Candidates, and their running mates in the presidential election, were subjected to close and critical scrutiny by APJ’s team of political analysts. In this October contribution for Eternity, Skillen begins: To vote wisely this election we ought to evaluate the presidential candidates and parties from at least three angles at once: changing party identities, leadership fit for the office and the coherence and completeness of their agendas for governing.

Both major parties are trying to outdo each other in pragmatic problem-solving. Thus Bentsen, Dukakis’s running mate, has a voting record making him closer politically to the Republican George Bush. Quayle is there to attract the baby-boomer vote for the republican side. On the second criteria both candidates have executive experience.

Both are more administrators than visionaries. It was not at all clear which of the two could actually work with the Congress and offer leadership rather than mere management.

161. ”The First Debate: Three Evaluations” with Fred Barnes, Cal Thomas World Oct, 3.

This was subtitled "A Monday morning look from three veterans". Bush and Dukakis had held a debate and this was the documented "expert” response. Skillen was impressed with the debate. It held more interest for him that he had expected. He notes that politics ... with these two candidates ... has become a matter of becoming adept at raising your flags, at learning what people want so you can target your audience. Further he notes a lack a specific vision for the presidential office. But one doesn’t really come away from the debate - anymore from hearing them on the stump or reading their stuff - with a sense of what the urgent matters are that need to be given the attention by the president.

162. “Solvent We Stand, Indebted We Fall” The Banner Oct. 17, 8-9

In the face of America’s mountain of debt, the federal government search for a "zero- balanced savings account", and the Christian hope in the biblical teaching
about a year of jubilee, Skillen sets forth an analysis of financial responsibility in
terms of alternative ways of understanding frugality. One can be an investing
debtor, or one can be a consuming debtor. Now, these contrasting examples of
an investing debtor who spirals upward out of debt and a consuming debtor who
spirals downward ever deeper into debt may be too simple to explain the
financial problems of our present, crazy world. But they do shed some light on
our predicaments. Investment debt puts consumption on hold so that one’s
economic situation is strengthened. Consumer debt puts investment on hold so
that one’s immediate strengths are derived from using one’s current resources to
fund consumption.

This brief analysis is reminiscent of the difference noted by Skillen in relation to
Goudzwaard and Baars’ analysis (see No.40 & No.74) with respect to the
differences between thinking that is oriented by norms and thinking oriented by
achieved goals. The final section of the article explains how the biblical teaching
of jubilee might lift the hopes of Christian readers.

O Lord, forgive us, as we forgive others, and make us good investing stewards of
your whole creation, for the sake of Christ our Lord who redeemed us from
destruction with the price of his blood!


Having identified the way in which pragmatism as a short-term strategy or
technique can sometimes lead to positive and useful outcomes (No.152), Skillen
in this piece for a popular evangelical magazine explains why pragmatism fails
the test as a public philosophy that Christians should endorse.

Pragmatists, when confronted by political issues, seldom ask as a first step: “Is
this unjust, and does the government bear responsibility to stop or reduce it?” “A
pragmatic approach might work pretty well when basic institutions, laws, and
habits of a society are sound and just. But it is not sufficient when the
foundations are shaken... In Politics, pragmatism doesn’t take us very far when
the very institutions and principles of society are being called into question.”
Here again is a statement about the need for a Christian contribution to political
responsibility based upon a sound public philosophy. This was a recurring theme
then in Skillen’s writings.


Neither George Bush nor Michael Dukakis is a visionary with a public philosophy
or a coherent agenda. Each in his own way is a pragmatist, a mission specialist,
a problem solver. They differ on many issues, and the parties they lead still
possess some distinguishing characteristics, but American voters will probably
have a difficult time making a judgment this year between the programme and
leadership potential of these two politicians. This article assesses the alternative
managerialisms of Bush and Dukakis.

1989

165. Letter to Editor Commentary Apr., 6-7 (reply to Leon R Kass).

This is a letter that extends the discussion of Leon Kass about the 6-day
structure of the creation as disclosed in Genesis 1. Says Skillen, Genesis 1
stresses not simply the distinction among different kinds, but a hierarchy of
order ... such that humans are stewards over all, under God. This letter unfolds
Skillen’s “sabbatical” view of God’s covenant with the creation, an idea he had
had from early on, and an idea that we can see began to be developed when he
wrote his earliest publications.

Genesis 1 points to an ontological order of creation and is not a report of simple
temporal sequences. This is a view of Genesis 1 that is distinct from readings
which assume the need to harmonise scripture with biological evolution, on the one hand, and creation science readings that want to confirm a scientific perception of temporal sequences on the other.

166. “Toward Political Maturity” CLSQ Winter, 28

Here is a reflective analysis of what is needed for the post-Reagan era of American politics. Political reflection seemed to have been dominated by AIDS epidemics among the world’s poor, massive debt levels in the world’s richest and powerful countries, and an international situation characterised by prospects of a change to US-Soviet relations, as other international tensions burst onto the scene. Skillen refers his CLSQ readers to recent Roman Catholic works: Richard John Neuhaus’s The Catholic Moment and the recently installed Pope John Paul II’s encyclical The Social Concerns of the Church. Fundamentalist protestants have been making political noises, but says Skillen, Noll’s One Nation Under God? confirms his view that American evangelicals lack political maturity. *En passant* mention is made of Dobson (family), Colson (prison reform) and Simon (hunger alleviation). “But don’t we need more than a multitude of issue groups when it comes to fulfilling our civic responsibilities - that of guarding and enhancing the public trust? Christians have hardly begun to debate with each other about the broad principles that should characterise their political involvement, and are too prone to rest content with the little beginnings they seem forever to be making. As a new Administration and Congress begin their work in 1989, those of us who feel a moral drive behind our public involvement should step up to a higher level of public debate and political thought. Our country, our neighbours and our fellow believers need a higher level of reasoning and public service from us in the decade ahead. Christians must grow up into political maturity and join the contemporary public debate in a newly serious and public way.”


See No.127. This was a contribution to a conference in 1986. Other Contributors included Lynn Buzzard, Edward G Dobson, J David Fairbanks, Lyman A Kellstedt, Stephen V Monsma, Corwin E Smidt, Ronald R Stockton and J David Woodard. The article begins with a quote from William Lee Miller The First Liberty (see also No.126 & No.139) about the Puritanism of Roger Williams.

At this Calvin College Conference on Christianity and Politics, Skillen fleshes out a policy proposal for Christian political involvement in which it is assumed that all citizens should be given every opportunity to have their political/ civic responsibilities expressed by an association of mutual political conviction. This is a proposal that is formulated over against the idea of pluralistic politics that is “eristic” or dogmatic in its orientation. The article is described by its author as a challenge to Christians, and it is a challenge on 3 levels:

First we need a new heart for political life as part of our new heart for God made possible by the redemption of creation in Christ Jesus.

Second, with that new heart we need to gain new habits of “careful-ness” with which to pursue our civic responsibilities - habits rooted in a discipline of obedience to God’s commands worked out in day-by-day detailed handling of civic responsibility.

And third, to grow as obedient disciples of Christ in caring for the political dimensions of his creation, we must recover a deep historical consciousness by which to understand both the brokenness and the goodness, both the tensions and the prospects, of our present situation.

This is a lecture to an association of non-government schools in Ontario. It explains that education is a public good and therefore necessarily of a political nature. It is one unavoidable pillar of the “common good”. This is an examination of the juridical aspect of education and explains how the “private” dimensions internal to family/school are inevitably linked to “public” dimensions, which means public dimensions that are overseen by Government. The argument is framed in terms of world-wide trends - the process of state-building and the consequences of the (so-called) Industrial Revolution. These two things - state-building and the industrial revolution - have been the focus of most of our attention for decades, and if you look at school curricula you can see that until fairly recently they have shaped most of what concerns us about how children are to understand the modern world. A new critical style has emerged in the west, especially after the collapse of communism.


The paper begins in the usual Skillen manner of asking a battery of questions: This year marks the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. Why should we take note of it? Apart from the fact that it came only 13 years after the American revolution, was there anything else noteworthy about the French version? We Americans tend to think of our revolution as the one that gave birth to a model political order for the world. What did the French revolution do for anyone? The paper is an interpretation of recent high profile reviews and commentary about the French revolution in relation to the ongoing crisis of liberalism. It is clearly designed to educate the APJ constituency and to give some guidance. It considers the article of Lawrence Stone in The New Republic April 17, 1989 contrasted with the “horrible” view put forward by Simon Schama Citizens: a Chronicle of the French Revolution 1989.

Skillen moves on to discuss The Revolution as Expression of a New Vision of Life and notes that the spirit of modernity that fired many revolutionaries was the same spirit that inspired many less violent ones who Schama approves. The discussion is brought up to date when Skillen explains that Communism Also Has Roots in the Revolution drawing on Zbigniew Brzezinski’s The Grand Failure: the Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century 1989. The Russian revolution was inspired in part by the French revolution by an appeal to the same spirit of modernity, but Brzezinski’s account contains “an element of unexamined self-congratulation” about the moral superiority and economic efficiency of capitalism (Stephen S Rosenfeld in The Washington Post Book World March 12, 1989). Perhaps today’s failing Communism represents that stream of revolutionary modernism which should be condemned while western democracy and capitalism represent the good parts of modern progress ...?

The next section is Democracy, Capitalism, and the Contemporary Crisis of Western Society examines Jerry Z Muller in Commentary December 1988 which while raising the globalizing tendency of capitalism also draws attention to the importance of non-market institutions in contemporary society. Contemporary society is highly differentiated among a variety of human communities and institutions, many of which are market-oriented and political, but many more possess characters and identities that are not primarily a function of either the market or the political system.

Ideology and Worldview is the next section. We have to ask, “What forms of capitalism, what forms of democracy, and what kinds of differentiated institutions are healthy and just?” This means considering what ought to be our concern in shaping human life in its cultural and social complexity. There follows a
discussion of Skillen’s reflections on Sowell A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles 1987, which were provoked in a Wheaton College seminar early in 1989. Sowell’s argument is framed in terms of a distinction between the “constrained” and the “unconstrained” visions of life. Skillen points out that the problem with this arbitrarily chosen framework is that it is unable to account for any “vision” other than those that are generated within the house of humanism. Sowell’s contrast between constrained and unconstrained visions remains confined to the inner tensions within humanism. The dilemma was this: if complete scientific mastery is the key to human power and freedom, then what happens when scientists conclude that human nature itself is completely controlled by the laws of nature which the sciences are mastering? What happens, of course, is that human freedom evaporates.

Finally, A Christian Vision is presented (pp.18-23) which is neither constrained nor unconstrained on Sowell’s terms. It is humble before God, careful to explore the laws of God’s creation, never imagining that human freedom might escape all boundaries. The notion of a political community need not be dispensed with. A Christian public philosophy cannot grow out of the left-wing or the right-wing of the French Revolution. It must not attach itself to the “constrained” or to the “unconstrained” visions of modernity. It will only emerge from a biblically inspired concern for the full and diverse meaning of life in God’s world, on God’s terms, judged and redeemed in Jesus Christ.


See No.128.

171. “What is a Monument to Justice?” CLSQ Spring, 31.

In this contribution for his CLSQ column, Skillen adopts the role of the self-critical journalist. He tells a story of his lunchtime search in Memphis - presumably he was at a conference that had something to do with Christian politics - for the place where Martin Luther King had been assassinated. It is a reflective piece, that shows the depth of a philosophically shaped political theory in which symbols and monuments have their rightful place, but which need to be put into the context of the call of God to do justice.

Instead of a “sacred space”, clearly marked, he found a protesting woman camping out in the streets. Jacqueline Smith, one time Metropolitan Opera aspirant, helped Skillen’s reflections about the tumble-down Lorraine Motel, site of a political wrangle over what to construct with the $8.8 million reserved for a grand monument. Smith said: “Dr King would have wanted the Lorraine and the money to be used to help the poor people of Memphis.

The motel is going to be turned into a high-tech tourist trap that will concentrate mainly on the murder of Dr King.” Skillen concludes: Now I’m on the search for monuments to justice. Remembering Dr King’s birthday in subsequent years will take me back to Jacqueline Smith, the Lorraine Motel and the idea of service offered up as monument to justice.


Gary Scott Smith has collated these different Christian approaches in God and Politics - the book’s subtitle is “four views of the reformation of civil government” - in order to maintain a level of civil discourse between Theonomy (represented by Greg L Bahnsen, Carl W Bogue, Joseph N Kickasola, Gary DeMar); Christian America (represented by Kevin L Clauson, T. M Moore, Harold O J Brown);
National Confessionalism (represented by H. B Harrington, David M Carson, D Howard Elliott, William Edgar) and Principled Pluralism (represented by Paul Schrottenboer, Gordon Spykman, Gary Scott Smith and Jim Skillen). When the term “pluralism” is used in American political debate it is often equated with relativism, so that the term “principled pluralism” sounds like “absolutist relativism” or “principled pragmatism.” Christian America, as put forward by Harold O J Brown, is an appeal for a Christianized American imperium and as such is a fundamental misunderstanding of God’s revelation culminating in Jesus Christ. Skillen indicates his view that the viewpoint is not dissimilar from the Theonomic view of Greg Bahnsen. Over against the view that says that Christian political action involves the appeal to the Decalogue or to other Commandments as a basis for political life, Skillen argues: If Christ is the sole and supreme mediator and lawgiver, then every human authority must be recognized as a limited authority in a particular field of competence. This means we must accept the ongoing differentiation of God’s creation order as intended from the beginning of time ... and consequently a general appeal to God’s law and moral authority is an inadequate basis for any human authority seeking sanction for his or her actions. Without doubt, God’s law holds for us; it is binding on us in this world. But no earthly authority has been given the right or obligation by Christ to enforce all of God’s law everywhere as if he or she were God or Christ.

The counter-point is a crucial one. It is a tension that exists between a so-called “reformational” or “principled pluralist” view and various forms of evangelical political ideology. The reason for the difference can be summed up in these words: no authority possesses competence to enforce all of God’s laws everywhere. To sum up: the real debate is over who should enforce what part of God’s law in which institutions and situations.


The subtitle of this book provides Skillen with an analogy that gives him critical leverage in his review. The word “landscape” ... is the key to understanding its character. If one thinks of the landscape of American politics chiefly in terms of geography, regions and resources, then this book hits the target. If, on the other hand, one thinks of landscape more as a metaphor for the thought forms, philosophical tensions, and underlying ideological moods and conflicts of the American people, then one will probably be disappointed with it.


The year is 1989 and the world now has to come to terms with Mikhail Gorbachev, glasnost and perestroika. Skillen’s comment notes George Soros’s verdict on Gorbachev’s “new thinking” - “Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking’ is weakest in economic matters” he is quoted as saying. Well, the Soviet Union may have collapsed, says the columnist, but there are some questions the western nations need to ask themselves: How are we doing then in the West, in the United States? While it is certainly the case that most western countries do not face the crises of the communist giants, neither do they exhibit a health that puts them beyond the need of critical examination.

(This CLSQ contribution is a basis for the next one No.177 which examines the Hegelian view of “The end of history?” by Francis Fukuyama).

Skillen notes:

If the weakest link of glasnost in the Soviet Union today is its economic thinking and reforms, could the weakest link in American life be its political thinking and action? Skillen encourages his readers to examine America’s public weak links. It is time for renewing the Christian mind in public service, law making and civic participation.
175. “How Do We Solve the Global Debt Crisis?” *Christian Century* Nov 8 1004-6.

This is a contribution to the prestigious magazine of Christian opinion concerning a “Statement on the Global Debt Crisis” issued by an ecumenical body Interfaith Action for Economic Justice. A “Third World Global/Local Links” meeting had been timed to coincide with World Bank and IMF September meetings. Indeed, something is wrong with a world in which “the rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer”, and in which the “environment is being rapidly depleted and wastefully exploited to the detriment of all people”, especially “at the expense of the poor.” Skillen’s judgment is that the statement does its job as an expression of anger and weeping. But the statement fails in its inability to make a sound connection between its moral rhetoric and the goals that it wants public officials to reach. The statement’s judgment about non-payment hangs entirely in the air, outside the context of identifying who should not pay whom, and apart from any argument about whether the non-payment should come about only as a result of debt forgiveness or as a matter of simple refusal by the debtor. The statement, in its lack of specificity, would have been better published if it was styled as an appeal to God for His judgment upon and restoration of the world.


The Surgeon General, appointed by President Reagan, was stepping down. A well-respected man, who used the nine months between his nomination and confirmation (Congressional political jockeying over his appointment) to develop, in his own words, a strategy “to espouse the cause of the disenfranchised - the elderly, mothers and children, handicapped kids and their families, baby Doe, those who needed organs for transplantation.” He was a Christian who had learned to take his past offices seriously. Now he had entered a new office, however humble - the job of chief public health officer for the whole country. Skillen’s column is, in fact, an attempt to express appreciation for Koop’s work in that office; one might almost say it has a pastoral dimension to encourage the man despite all the “Christian” criticism.

177. “Another View of History” *CLSQ* Fall, 31.

With the publication of Francis Fukuyama’s provocative article “The end of history?” in the summer issue of The National Interest, Skillen raises questions about how to interpret the earth-shaking events of the time in a Christian perspective.

On a deeper level, however, we must not accept the confining terms of this debate.

Didn’t a great deal of political philosophy precede Hegel? Doesn’t anyone recall Augustine, that Christian “founding father” about 1500 years older than Hegel who first helped the Western world to realize that the end of Rome would not mark the end of history?

Skillen’s judgment is that Fukuyama’s viewpoint, for all it’s ability to capture the apparent sense of the moment, is closed in important ways. Reflections on the end of history must go far beyond considering the “rationality of capitalism and democracy” to anticipating God’s climactic self-revelation at the great banquet feast in the City of God - the new Jerusalem. The problem with Fukuyama’s view is that it implies a simplistic notion of Christianity, compatible with the confines of the theory of the liberal state, that religion is purely and simply a private matter.

This article continues Skillen’s promotion of critical reflection in the Augustinian tradition.(No.22, No.27, No.36, No.40, No.43, No.60, No.64, No.103)

Skillen, as political theorist, who has already published worthwhile reviews on international relations, touching on Latin America - see No.5 (Vanguard review); No.19, No.27, No.35 (contribution to RES *Theological Forum*), No.68 (on Marxism), No.74 (North-South dialogue), No.88 (Nicaragua), No.105 (Bonino). Here he reviews this published result of a year-long research project of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship. It’s mandate had been to elaborate “a Reformed approach to the crisis in Central America.” It deals with many aspects of American foreign policy, evident in the region. But the standpoint of the authors shifts frequently and is so empathetic in nature that it keeps on leading the reader to feel many different kinds of pain but without always distinguishing carefully the specific responsibilities that different parties should bear. Still the book is judged by Skillen to be a worthy contribution and his criticisms are focused upon one of the “guidelines for North American policymakers” namely that problems need to be viewed “holistically”. The book is judged as a beginning that does not go far enough. How should these countries go about reforming themselves? How can the US actually help?

Should not some “guidelines” have been included for Central American administrators? Skillen does not want to discredit the book, and respects the effort that has gone into it. His review explains why the book may exasperate some readers, and be found to be insufficiently helpful by the policymakers to whom the book had been directed.

1990


If this were a book for Chinese readers, it is fair to conclude that it is a book to encourage Chinese American Christians to think about their Christian responsibilities, also in their “new land”. The term “social reform” features prominently in the title and throughout the essay and it would seem that Skillen is trying to draw attention to the political reality around the world in which “social reform” is a term that no longer refers exclusively to “socialist reforms”. The recent history of the “welfare state” is outlined. Then Skillen gives two examples: one is the Christian democratic movement of Calvinists and Roman Catholics in the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. The other example is a strand of neo-conservative and neo-liberal thinking in the aftermath of Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty”. It has emerged within the liberal-conservative tension in the polity America - it is generally acknowledged that the state has an integrating and differentiating function to perform for all non-state institutions and communities.


Another article for Moody Monthly (see No.163) which while examining the urban crisis, emphasizes the importance of developing a Christian public philosophy. Skillen begins with a description of the discouraged state of a Washington-based Christian group seeking ways to tackle the problems of the inner city. The urban crisis does, in fact, confront evangelicals with an immense challenge that we do not fully understand.

The modern city, which is rapidly becoming the residence of most people throughout the world, cries out for a vision of “complex community” in a “differentiated society”. A brief sociological overview of the structure of the city
leads Skillen to question the structure of predominant evangelical thinking by which politics, economics and the media only come into consideration when drugs, crime, pornography, and illiteracy finally touch us directly. Then we complain about the police, the city bureaucrats, or the secularized media. Skillen explains why the urban crisis is yet another reason why Christians should be developing a Christian mind, a Christian approach to culture in God’s world, a Christian sense of responsibility for complex community in highly differentiated society... God’s people ... must live as the people of God in all the institutions of our urban society.


Skillen’s review is formed in order to be as positive as possible for a book that, he says, should have had the subtitle: “Ethical and Theological Reflections by Some American Presbyterians.” It does not truly encompass either the Reformed faith or economics. It is a book in which essays by members of the Presbyterian Church (USA) are collected together and published.

There are excellent essays by Ronald H Stone and David Little on Calvin’s economics, by Preston Williams exposing the racism upheld by reformed Americans and Gordon and Jane Dempsey Douglas on sustainable food systems, but the book disappoints the reviewer because it fails to deal with macroeconomic and broader policy issues.


This is a republication of The Testimony in Public Justice Report 13:3 December 1989 and also found as Meditation 20 in A Covenant to Keep (No.294).

This meditation articulates a theme Skillen had been emphasizing for some time. It relates to the political task of Christians in response to the gospel teaching about the wheat and the tares.

If God is patient with those who are committed to following His Son then He is placing the onus on them to be patient in their dealings with all neighbours, believers and unbelievers, as ways are sought to restore, maintain and advance the cause of public justice. There is a time for everything under the sun including noise and impatience. But when it comes to the urgency of establishing justice, God is not always loud or rushed. The reason is not that God is less concerned with justice than with other things. Rather, it has to do with his character and his purposes. Jesus did not shout down the Pharisees, or worry about winning arguments. Jesus the servant, anticipated by Isaiah 42, is the one who leads justice to victory and does so by a path in which he had to endure quietly, patiently, without breaking down or crying out. In this man of justice we can firmly put our trust. In that quiet One the nations should put their hope.


This is another of Skillen’s journalistic pieces which involve commentary on current media news and views. In this article Skillen is also the political science educator, seeking to illustrate a distinction about Government that may be helpful. Time magazine had run with the cover story “Is Government Dead?” Well, says Skillen, to ask whether Government is dead is metaphorically like the question that had to be asked of two collapsed bridges after the California earthquake. “Is it dead?” was a valid question to be asked of the Bay Bridge with its collapsed, though fixable, section. The answer was, apparently, ”No!” But ask the same question of highway 1- 800 in Oakland and the answer is an unequivocal “Yes!” There’s no way that bridge can be fixed. So what is it going to be? Which bridge symbolizes our Government in Washington (and perhaps in
cities and states around the country)? Will traffic begin flowing again after a few repairs - after congressional leaders and the President work out their differences? Or is something wrong at the very foundations, in the system’s design and construction? The article concludes with an appeal to a “whole of government” critique - we need to look at the whole system, and ask about its complete design, complex order, rightness and justice to ensure our government’s soundness.


The article forms a basis for, or is an edited version of, the chapter dealing with “pro- American Conservatives” in The Scattered Voice (see No.192). It is written for a British readership and that may be part of the reason why it is different from the form the argument takes in the chapter in the book. It begins with a discussion of Jerry Falwell’s retirement and an assessment of the aims and strategies of the Moral Majority. The article strongly affirms that Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority are indeed a very important part of American politics. This is a critical review of their contribution, and it concludes that Pro-American Christians have not produced a comprehensive Christian framework for public justice - for wise political thinking and action grounded in a biblical vision. They have taken the system for granted and are simply calling on fellow citizens to help them preserve or recover it. Further, a pro- American conservative agenda is not sufficient to inspire and support long-term Christian political habits of seriousness, thoroughness, and cooperative endurance. The Moral Majority proved that. The Moral Majority has failed to offer sound guidance for political involvement in a political system that they claim is based on Christian principles. Is our constitutional order one that forever confines citizens to a fight for majority power in order to oppose every immorality they don’t like and to promote any morality they do want? Many pro-American Christians do not have the stomach for long-term political engagement on this basis. The article includes a critical review of one of the intellectual leaders in the movement, John Eidsmoe. Upholding Jefferson’s view on the one hand, Eidsmoe attacks the educational philosophy of Horace Mann without realising that Mann based his idea of the common school on Jefferson’s Unitarian republicanism. There are indeed deep moral problems facing America but the Moral Majority is neither political nor Christian. When it claims to be acting politically its policies decline to personal morality. It’s appeal to the Christian basis of its movement is revealed as a reliance on pro-American sentiment.


This is a letter to the editor in response to a “Commentary” column by John E Coons, “‘Choice’ Plans Should Include Private Option” in the January 17, 1990 edition.

Other published letters included one from Edd Doerr (see No.47) and Professor Richard A Baer of Cornell University, a member of the Advisory Council for the Center for Public Justice.

Here Skillen writes provocatively and says that the advocacy of “choice” in education, as espoused by “choice advocates” from the President down, compares too closely with election officials in some of the Soviet-bloc countries where the Communist Party is still trying to hold on to its monopoly. Readers may well have found the parallel obscure, although the point will not be lost on Edd Doerr whose letter equates non-State education with “private” wealth, privilege and upper class pretensions. Skillen’s concludes that choice based on wealth only serves to aggravate another problem in American society - the growing distance between rich and poor.

See May 15, 1991 letter to Education Week No.204.
The present time, says Skillen, presents significant opportunities for the development of a distinctively Christian social philosophy. The communitarian critique of liberalism, is part of a general crisis in the foundations of liberal philosophy and thinkers like Eric Vögelin and MacIntyre have suggested that the crisis will have to be overcome by a rediscovery of the philosophical tradition. By that they mean a rediscovery of classical and Aristotelian thought. Thus they propose a reform of the dominant tradition by a reconsideration of a tradition that has been left behind. Voegelin and MacIntyre articulate perspectives that are therefore consonant with the communitarian criticisms of Robert Bellah et al. Habits of the Heart 1985, a book which seeks to remind us that American history was founded on republican and biblical understandings of social life. In all of this work, we find the theme of recovery - of remembering what has been forgotten or lost. Voegelin makes a big point of this, arguing that the failure of modernity is its forgetfulness and rejection of normative experience that ought not to have been forgotten. Michael Sandel’s argument comes down to a change in liberalism’s individualistic view of the person. Sandel advocates a view of the “encumbered self”. (No.313) Michael Novak’s The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (1982), as with Peter L Berger and Richard Neuhaus, advocate a strengthening of “mediating institutions” (No.216), but this effectively retains, as does Sandel’s suggestion of the “encumbered self”, underlying assumptions in the liberal worldview. This is no return to an idyllic Christian past. No, what we need today is a vision of human life that is large enough to encompass and account for: (1) highly differentiated mega-corporations; (2) highly intimate families and personal relationships; (3) highly diversified cultural and linguistic traditions around the world existing simultaneously at this very moment ...; (4) overwhelmingly powerful states often restricted by a paralysis ...; and (5) technologies that propel both rapid differentiation and inevitable integration at the same time. A discussion follows about the Christian vision of God establishing His creational purposes through Christ and His people. There follows a brief introduction to principled, structural pluralism and confessional pluralism. This perspective also holds a valuable potential for new social theory. ... We will transcend historicism not by ignoring history or pretending that it does not bind and shape us, but by acknowledging the transcendence of God who is the norm-giver and who calls us in Christ to move toward the new City that he is building in and through us at present.

Once again the discussion of a contentious public issue is handled deftly and in such a way as to promote a better overview of the entire criminal justice system. The article is in part a reflection upon (rather than a review of) Daniel Van Ness’s Crime and its Victims published by IVP 1986. Capital punishment requires justice at the foundations of a criminal justice system. Capital punishment is not that foundation. Retribution and recompense should be meted out with a view to restore and promote the search for justice among citizens. Human vengeance has no place in the doing of public justice. Van Ness observed that Scripture neither prohibits the death penalty under all circumstances nor mandates it in each case where it might legitimately be deserved and Skillen agrees and suggests a critical view of the criminal justice system to avoid the death penalty becoming subject to popular desire for vengeance. There is also a problem with confronting the debilitating and confidence sapping consequences when victims and many people throughout a society believe that justice is no longer being carried out. The way ahead for Christians, Skillen says, is to get busy seeking the reform of the entire criminal justice system. See also No.452 (2011).
188. “Will Politics Turn to God?” CLSQ, Spring, 31.

Glenn Tinder had written a cover story for the December Atlantic - “Can we be good without God?” Once again Skillen takes up the journalist’s pen to discuss, in a journalistic fashion, issues that have been given some exposure in the media. He is addressing legal professionals and is therefore justified in assuming that his readers would be reading public affairs magazines and journals. The cover story took issue with Friedrich Nietzsche; according to Tinder, if we continue to live as if God and Christian ethics are dead, then little hope exists for a political future in which individuals will be respected and protected. Skillen divines a new interest in the Christian foundations of the West, and refers to an editorial of The Economist as well as an article in The New York Review of Books January 18, 1990 by the new Czech President Vaclav Havel.

In conclusion Skillen encourages dialogue between Christians about the way forward as they consider the massive changes that are going on apace round about them. Tinder’s view - Christians may have to accept the necessity of the state even as they denounce it - is not the only possible interpretation of politics from a Christian viewpoint. Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and Protestants need to hear each other about these matters to discover God’s will for their political contribution in the years ahead.


It is possible to see in Skillen’s analysis the beginnings of a systematic overview of American social welfare and education. The structure of the article is important. From what is said in the first two pages, as well as the concluding comment on the last page, Skillen is aware of the recent contributions made by critical sociological studies of education. John Chubb and Terry Moe “Politics, Markets, and the Organization of Schools” American Political Science Review 1988, advocated a system overhaul, opening schooling to a free market that puts control in the hands of individuals and individual schools. (In Disestablishment (No.80) the initial sociological reference point was Bowles and Gintis Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life 1976). For the moment Skillen doesn’t direct his discussion to the problematic assumption that links schooling’s purpose and ultimate meaning to GNP (and US world leadership). He writes in a way that assumes that his readers already know about the class division within the educational system which is a central factor in the reproduction of such inequality. Skillen makes a remarkable statement that anticipates some very rich and cogent socio-political research. The institutionalization of schooling, the formalizing of certain language categories, a much-disputed but still dominant public philosophy - all of these are among the elements intertwined in a complexity that has left the Supreme Court and the broader public in a state of confusion and ambiguity over religion and education. This provides a hint of Skillen’s broader architectonic critique of American society.


This is a review of a book published by an evangelical-reformed publisher. The book documents the author’s attempt to test an hypothesis about the relationship between religion and liberal culture. The ruling theories are two. The first is that religion directly supports and sustains American liberal culture. The second is that religion directly challenges liberal culture either by way of countercultural radicalism or by calling for a return to an earlier American culture that liberalism has displaced. But Fowler has a dissenting view. Religion’s impact upon
America is indirect and inadvertent, providing a temporary and occasional escape from the least satisfying elements of liberalism. The strength of the book is found in its wide survey of literature and recent developments by documenting nearly every influential religious phenomenon that has appeared in the US in the past twenty years. But the author is uncritical about the language he uses, and has not stopped to ask about the religious roots of his basic distinctions. Thus Fowler, rather than offering something entirely new, provides what is, in effect, an updated refinement of the secularisation hypothesis that assumes that the widely-held assumption about religion being a private and personal matter actually allows religion to find its right place in human life and experience. Fowler has actually described the American way of life, which, as such, is comparable with all other ways of life.


The globe is covered with tensions between neighbouring nations. How can neighbours who have fought long and bitterly be reconciled to each other? Further, what is political reconciliation? How can we promote it? Skillen draws on insights in From Under the Rubble (1974) by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in which the Russian dissident discusses repentance among nations. Self-limitation is the key, he suggests. “Freedom is self-restriction! Restriction of the self for the sake of others!” This is a possible criterion, suggests Skillen, for discerning the way in which nations have achieved reconciliation. It can guide internal conflicts within one nation and also conflicts between nations. The Soviets certainly appear to have been repenting of their (immediate) past imperialism. Solzhenitsyn advances the complex notion that Russians are more prone to do evil to themselves than to others. But, says Skillen, the Lithuanians may disagree, because they see themselves as one of the “others,” nations that have suffered great injustice at the hands of the Russian-led Soviet empire after it forcibly incorporated Lithuania into its union. After 40 years on the “inside”, Lithuanians may agree that they suffered greater evil than the Soviets perpetrated “outside”. What Solzhenitsyn helps us to think about is that with a growing number of people in a shrinking world, states must practice self-limitation if so many different national aspirations must be satisfied. Moreover, if self-limitation on a national scale is crucial, and if its roots lie in the Christian tradition, then the urgency of both preaching the Gospel and working for peaceful conflict resolution and reconciliation at the political level will only increase.

192. The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square
Zondervan.

The sub-title of this volume: Christians at odds in the public square indicates the book’s purpose. It does not aim to justify the relevance of a Christian view for political life but to examine the contribution of the intra-Christian conflict to the American polity and to make some suggestions about the significance of that conflict for “the State of the union”, and for the Christian political vocation in the American polity.

In certain respects, this can be read as the “research report” that Skillen is presenting, having worked as the “front man” for the Center for Public Justice since the late 1970s. (see also the response to his critics in the “Author Meets Critics” session of the SSSR, 1992, No.222).

In his Introduction to this book, Skillen discusses the momentous changes of recent times in terms of a metaphor: shifts in tectonic plates. This metaphor had also been used by his colleague, and Center associate, Roy Clouser. In The Myth of Religious Neutrality - an Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories (1991), Clouser states: The enormous influence of religious beliefs remains, however, largely hidden from casual view; its relation to the rest of life is like that of the great geological plates of the earth’s surface to the continents.
and oceans. At this time, the work of Clouser and Skillen was coming to maturity, and the use of the same metaphor indicate co-operation. Skillen’s political theory is featured in Clouser’s book, but the fact that the metaphor features in the Introductions of both books indicates co-operative effort in the wake of “techttonic shifts” also felt among supporters of Christian higher education. Skillen examines the variously contending views against the background of a differentiated and differentiating (post-feudal, republican and market-based) society and the conservative-liberal spectrum that dominates and constrains political life.

The initial chapter examines The Roots of Ambivalence and Conflict, a brief statement of the historical calling of Christians to serve the Lord God, showing how the political responsibility of citizens and Government, is something given, not something dreamed up. The chapters that follow examine Pro-American Conservatives (the Moral Majority, Professor John Eidsmoe, Harold O J Brown, Jerry Falwell and Ed Dobson); the Cautious and Critical Conservatives - Colson, Amstutz, Bandow and Myers; The Sophisticated Neo-Conservatives Richard John Neuhaus (No.106, No.116, No.134, No.186, No.196, No.216) and Michael Novak (No.19, No.152, No.186, No.338); Traditional and Reflective Liberals surveys the Catholic tradition of the common good as it had come to expression in the 1986 pastoral letter on the economy by the American Catholic Bishops; Civil Rights Reformers explores the legacy of the civil rights movement and Revd Jesse Jackson (see No.100 and No.158) its most recent advocate; Pro-Justice Activists examines Jim Wallis of the Sojourners Community, and Ronald Sider, of Evangelical Social Action. Both had signed the 1973 “Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern”; Theonomic Reconstructionists and in particular the views of Greg Bahnsen (see No.10, No.20, No.172). Chapters 9 From Contention to Communication and 10 Is There Hope for the Future? spell out the possibilities for Christian political advancement in the American polity.


This is about Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. The question Skillen poses is a simple one: How are we to think about this? It would be one matter if he were a simple thief caught by police; the fact that he controls the Iraqi government and military and has stolen another country makes it quite a different matter. The question is: What does justice demand in the case? Can justice even be done?

In international affairs states are assumed to be sovereign. So how is justice in an international sense to be enforced. Who is the policeman in the case of Kuwait who can force the Iraqi to go home? But there is also another question: who can punish the crime committed by Saddam Hussein’s government and military from further acts in the future? This discussion presupposes the “principled pluralist” view of international relations. A persistent theme in Skillen’s political theory is the biblical vision of Christ’s universal Kingship, a kingship that is not just political but over all of life. Christ Jesus’ authority is such that non-political international relations are also subject to Him.


John Mason, of the Association of Christian Economists and Doug Bandow (see No.192, No.200) of the Cato Institute, are also featured in this “closer look” at the budget. Mason says the 1990 Budget brought “greater responsibility without compromising freedom”; Bandow says a continuation of treating “the budget process as a special-interest looting expedition”; Skillen identifies positive factors - there is long-term planning vision involved, and the greatest burden is put on those with highest incomes with some relief for the working poor. The problems are described in these terms: The fact that the budget became a crisis in itself has obscured the debate over this deeper and more important reality for which a
budget exists (ie policy implementation and program development). Given the huge deficit this budget barely begins to face the deeper political crisis.


In the run-up to the November elections, a budget crisis had emerged. The fact is, however, that the current budget crisis is not merely budget-related but a manifestation of a growing political crisis - a predicament in which political leadership is increasingly fragmented, and voters are more and more confused. The American system is not giving voters genuine alternatives. Instead it is all a matter of shifting policy to improve an image in order to give oneself distance from one's opponent in an upcoming election campaign. The deeper problem is that now we are facing the breakdown of the entire interconnected system that once provided the foundation for individualized pragmatic solutions. American politics is addicted to making do with short-term solutions designed to improve political power but this makes major system reform all the more urgent.


This is a slightly revised version of the 10pp mimeo-ed review circulated by APJ to interested readers of Public Justice Report in 1985 (see No.106). At the outset Skillen adds a note of contemporary relevance, 6 years after its initial publication. In the 1980s, The Naked Public Square was one of the most frequently discussed books on American religion and politics. It will remain worth (sic!) reading throughout the 1990s.

There are points where the book reviewer has sharpened his statement by deleting passages: Skillen identifies the ambiguity in Neuhaus’s argument by reference to the title of the book. This paragraph too, is an edited distillation of what had previously been presented in two complex paragraphs: The title of his book and much of its argument leads the reader to believe that secularism has succeeded in creating a naked public square and that religious Americans need to cover it with religion again. But, as I have tried to argue, this is not the real problem, and Neuhaus himself provides ample evidence that the public square is not naked but is presently the battle ground of contending religions, with Christians and non-Christians on both sides of the conflict.

Further along in the discussion Skillen identifies Neuhaus’s philosophical problem: he accepts with little question a typical description of politics as a functional, means-to-ends power struggle. The review, as a re-written statement, confirms Skillen’s approach to this and other Christian approaches. They remain on his radar (as does John Howard Yoder) even though he has previously studied them. offering critical and dissenting comments.


This contribution cites some of Skillen's early writings (No.60, No.71, No.73) as well as the works which he had reviewed of Mouw (No.31) and Yoder (No.10), which would indicate that it was composed in the early 1980s. Sadly the later revised edition simply republishes the earlier essay.

The essay begins with The Biblical Witness explaining that Government is similar to other forms of stewardship in creation - each with a responsibility for administering part of God's creation under God’s authority. The general biblical teaching is reviewed, leading on to a discussion of the positive tasks of distribution and retribution, a "public responsibility". This is a responsibility to look after the general public health and welfare of the entire society. Though Government administers the legal code it is also subject to law and as such is a
part of God’s self-revelation - God’s Kingship is attested in scripture along with His being Father and Shepherd.

Christian Responses in History reviews the way in which the early Christian communities functioned politically and what they taught. The Christianization of the Roman Empire coincided with the Romanization (or Imperialization) of the religion of God’s grace in Christ. The split between East and West saw the Eastern church following closely to the Roman tradition, whereas the West was patterned by a ecclesiastical sovereignty over feudal estates. Minorities within East and West opposed such earthly entanglements, and the Reformation was partly in protest against Roman dominance over politics and culture. The Anabaptists drew on the previous minority traditions of withdrawal while the Calvinists and Lutherans accommodated the emerging centralized state powers. In the West Roman, Calvinist, Lutheran and Anabaptist reinterpretations of Christianity meant alternative views of public legal order competed whereas in the East the age- old pattern was maintained. Christians these days try to adapt their faith to one or other of the various ideologies that struggle for dominance in the "secular" political realm.

Key Issues and Questions for Our Day are outlined. The first is the relation of the Biblical revelation to political life. What is the biblical revelation about justice and how does that throw a light upon competing ideologies and policies? The second is: What is the state and how is it’s special task to be understood in a complex, differentiated society? Third: How is politics to be understood as a global task for all citizens and their governments everywhere?

The demand for justice is increasingly the demand for global justice, and Christians should be leading the way to an understanding of what the proper human stewardship of government means in response to Christ the King.

1991


See No.84 - CPJ Position Paper, No.95, and No.147, and No.176 (on C Everett Koop). Where Christian political action tends to be reactionary - that is when it is mobilized in response to proposed legislation or when controversial court judgments are handed down - consideration of the political structure is not uppermost in the minds of those mobilized. Skillen draws attention to how opposing views manifest a growing complexity in the struggle over abortion in the US at both Federal and State levels. The article discusses Webster, a 1989 US Supreme Court judgment, which signaled the possibility of state regulation of abortion by a shift in the Court from the Roe ruling’s defense of a woman’s right to privacy to an appreciation for the nuances of state regulations designed to protect pregnant women, children and the unborn. State regulations may require the parents of pregnant minors to be informed. But as a result of Webster, both pro-life and pro-choice camps have turned their attention to the state level. The article is thus a description of the changing political strategies of the pro-life and pro-choice movements. The detail in the overall abortion policy still needs to be negotiated and the pro-life lobby groups seems to have realized that Roe could be effectively overturned by rules for administering the law (no federal funds to promote abortion as a way of family planning, informing parents of minors, and tighter restrictions on late term abortions). The pro-life movement had become more open to the possibility that abortion may be allowable in cases of rape or incest. There is a discussion of how the debate is carried in the media with elections in sight and how the issue of abortion arises in many different contexts. The possibility of RU486 is also mentioned. Those who want to advance the protection of human life at all stages will have to become ever more sophisticated to deal with these complexities. They will also have to locate the fight for unborn life in the larger context of children’s health care and medical
research. Skillen’s article puts Christian action into an historical context with a view to the future. He affirms that it is impossible to predict the future of abortion in the United States, yet he maintains a future orientation by concluding that the next decade could prove decisive on abortion, but we may need another decade beyond that to understand what happened.


Professor Chewning, an academic with a record of a long-term commitment to developing Christian ethics, has edited a book with various contributions to a Christian contribution to the public square. The chapter first discusses The Contemporary Context, and seven issues are then enunciated: 1. What is the nature of the Government’s responsibility for education - what is the proper distribution of responsibility for education and how should government’s responsibilities be distributed at federal, state and local levels?; 2. How is justice and equity to be established in education?; 3. Is it right that education is supported by public funding?; 4. How should funds be distributed?; 5. How is parental choice to be respected by government?; 6. How should government legitimately intervene in education to improve education standards?; 7. How should public policy for education be related to religion?

The next sections Biblical Principles and The Illuminating Power of Biblical Principles for Contemporary Public Policy include an argument that “the role of government should be that of establishing an ‘agency relationship’ with the community (representing the parents and the broadest needs of a pluralistic society) rather than [the Government seeing itself as] being the foremost ‘principal party’ determining every facet of the educational process in the public arena” (Chewning p.12).

Within such a framework the history of legal judgments in the US is examined in terms of the legal interpretation of public schooling. Parental principalship is pitted against the assumption of the Graeco-Roman tradition that the government of a city or state holds the primary and direct responsibility for educating its citizens. These two assumptions have framed schooling in the US. Up until 1840 parental principalship was recognised. Since then State primacy has dominated. The rest of the section reiterates legal cases that have been reported earlier in Skillen’s published writings.

The final section A New Direction for Education Policy in the United States examines how a national education policy might be framed. Families, children’s needs, education agencies other than those run by the Government, all need to be kept in view. Such a policy is needed for the sake of the equitable well-being of all citizens. Further, such policy should henceforth [take] for granted both the principalship of parents in the education of their children and the right of all schools to receive fair and equitable treatment as they offer their services to the public.


This “Briefing Paper” from the IRD contains responses to a discussion essay by IRD Economics Associate Fredrick P Jones. Participants: Doug Bandow (No.192 and No.194), E Calvin Beisner, Robert Benne, Gerald W Brock, Richard Chewning (No.199), Kenneth R Craycraft Jr, Donna K Dial, Kurt C Schaefer, Herbert Schlossberg (No.237), Skillen and Todd Steen.

Skillen commends Jones’s paper and adds: Given his survey, the point at which I would focus attention is the seriously mounting tension between nationalist and protectionist forces, on the one hand, and internationalist and integrative forces,
on the other hand. Skillen develops his thesis by focusing attention upon GATT negotiations which broke down due to nationalist and protectionist tendencies. NATO and GATT no longer apply to international society as they did when they were set up. The international system has moved on and developed further. I expect, then, that the emerging era will be defined more by conflict and experiment than by any adequate strategic planning. There will more international economic conflict in the years ahead because more international economic agreements will fail or collapse. Blocs will form in Europe, North America, and in the pacific around Japan. Cooperation among the big three economic regions will be ad hoc and episodic, with the Third World winning and losing by happenstance while having relatively little voice in the decisions that determine international economic relations.

The concluding and parting comment seems somewhat pessimistic but appropriate given the prevailing context of collapsing economic agreements around the globe (and presumably a tradition that says such agreements can be abrogated if they are characterized as opposed to the national interest ref comments on pacta sunt servanda No.27). Perhaps a very critical economic or military situation, such as a global depression or continuing explosiveness in the Middle East, will force leaders of the most powerful nations to create some new and better international institutions. But until that time, I don’t expect to see much firm or enduring agreement about what constitutes the common good of the international community.


Skillen’s articulation of Government responsibility emphasizes the normative constraint upon Government’s contribution to the political community, completely governed by a “stewardship responsibility” under God, the Creator. This “Background Paper” develops the environmental theme that was canvassed earlier in the life of CPJ with the publication of a position paper and other resources (No.81, No.82). For the development of this theme in later work see No.266 which then becomes a basis for “Chapter 7 “Liberalism and the Environment” in In Pursuit of Justice 2004 (No.341).

Skillen, however, is theorising against a strong political tradition that assumes that Government must accommodate private ownership of land - the “value” of property is determined by ownership or added to it by the owner’s initiative with the consequence that any later discovery that private property carries additional public or ecological value will have to be handled by a process of “intrusion” or “interference” through which government seeks to satisfy the later “interest” by buying out or compensating the earlier or more fundamental “interest” of the owner. In such circumstances, compensation will be just if it can be afforded. In other words ownership rules the rules for land ownership. There is a fundamental weakness which allowed the ambiguous identification of African American people ... as people and as property in a way that could not do justice to them as people. The case of child labour laws is also canvassed in this context. Justice must begin with just recognition - proper identification - of every person and non-human entity that exists under law and in the marketplace... mistakes are possible and misidentification does happen but the end result should be a clarification of what is more fundamental and prior in contrast to what is less fundamental and lower on the priority list ... [f]reedom for slaves is a higher priority than compensation of slave owners.

The point is not obscure IF one keeps in mind the comprehensiveness required by law to administer public justice. In the case of land there has to be appropriate identification of the different types of land which cannot be truly undertaken as long as environmental justice is a political debate to be resolved by one interest group perpetually slugging it out with other, presumably anti-environmentalist, groups. It’s not just adopting a new mindset. It is complex
work which requires hard and sustained analysis to understand the current situation, current taxation and other legislative efforts to halt pollution and environmental degradation. It is more than an appeal to moral values that demands respect in nature and the market-place. It involves rethinking the nature and morality of the political system from the inside out, asking what justice demands of human beings in relationships to the entire ecosystem.

202. "Starting fresh in a broken world" Commencement King’s College, Edmonton, Alberta Apr. 27.

An appeal to the graduating class about the spiritual dynamics of the world they are about to enter. The thesis of Christopher Lasch The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (1991), that the secularized faith in progress is a failure, is compared and contrasted with Abraham Kuyper’s November 9, 1891 address to the first Christian Social Congress (see No.209) with the aim of clarifying what it will mean for you “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” in Christ Jesus (Eph 4:1). Lasch, like so many others, is looking for a new faith and seems to believe that we can find our moral guide in many different sorts of lower-class people simply because they have stood up to the progressivist illusion and have recognized some limits to human freedom. By way of contrast, Skillen outlines Kuyper’s view of the “little people” who supported a Christian way of life in the Netherlands.

And, says Skillen, this Christian humility had a distinctive progressive impact on history contributing to the ending of slavery, to greater concern for the welfare of the poor, to greater respect for women and children, and to limitations on the accumulation of capital for the sake of the well-being of all... The difference between Kuyper and Lasch ... is that Kuyper does not in the end place his hope for the future in the lower classes and their traditions. Rather, he calls all people, both high and low, to humble themselves before the majesty of God. And so the question is redefined as “What faith can guide high and low alike to health and sanity in the coming decades?” The call is made to forsake pride and self-confidence by becoming a willing prisoner of Jesus Christ.


In the context of President Bush’s announcement of the arrival of a “new world order”, fundamentalist dispensationalists fomented yet another round of predictions of rapture, the final battle and a “trumpet sounding judgment”. Scripture, says Skillen, contains many images of the “end times”. The battlefield is only one. Paul lived conflict but he spoke to the church of the coming love feast, the marriage of Christ to His bride and God’s communion with His people, the completion of child-birth. It is more important to do now what Christ calls us to do than to try and map out the last days. We need to act in ways that demonstrate to every neighbour how God is adopting children into His family. This is another step in the development of a comprehensive view of the biblical revelation with respect to our political calling (see No.287, No.294).

204. Letter to Editor Education Week May 15, (on “Catholic Educators Press to Add Sectarian Schools to Choices Plan”).

The letter addresses the use of the term “sectarian”. Even a casual look at any random selection of dictionaries will show that the term “sectarian” not only has a nasty pedigree but also continues to carry a highly prejudicial meaning. Some of its common synonyms are “bigoted”, “narrow-minded” and “heretical”. It is instructive to read how Skillen, with Center supporter and Editorial Adviser, Richard Baer, draw attention to the way words are used in an educational magazine. Baer had written a 20-page article in the Journal of Law and Politics showing that the term “sectarian” has been used throughout American history to marginalize Americans who have been committed to the “wrong” kind of religion,
or who have been “religious” rather than “secular”. The letter observes that the equation religious = sectarian goes back to Jefferson and actually violates the spirit of the Constitution. At any rate, please stop using the equation “religious = sectarian” it is offensive ...


See No.225 below.

A discussion of justice. an exposition of the biblical view of hope in the midst of suffering (see No.119) taking its point of departure from Job.

The second Job becomes the One in which hope for justice becomes a genuine reality. Our response must be to demonstrate that since God took on human flesh and suffered death in order to overcome evil in this world, we will choose to live by giving every ounce of energy to promote justice; to encourage people to live just lives; to minister to those suffering injustice; to weep with those who weep; to urge sinners of all kinds to repent; and to seek reconciliation between victims and offenders.

This pastoral address, seeks to discuss how criminal justice is part of a larger context defined by the human calling to do justice. Criminal justice is but one side of public justice and by no means the central issue. The central issue is whether God and His Word is honoured in our lives, lives which include efforts to uphold justice, however they may have to come to expression. And then, via reference to Job, justice is counter-balanced, by reference to the deep sense of “cosmic” injustice we often feel when suffering is our lot as it was with Job.


See No.473. This book reviews an assessment of American political economic transformation between 1776 (the Revolution) and 1789 (the adoption of the Federal Constitution). If we can read Skillen’s research agenda off his publications, we can say that Increasingly he had been turning his attention to American history. The challenge of the union, from the start, was to overcome the pretensions of state governments without destroying the states. The book is about how the colonies moved from revolutionary independence to federal union. Skillen isolates an observation that has been part of his own explanation of American politics. Colonial America focused its political and economic discourse on the idea of interest, and this is why “Americans had no clear conception of the role government should play in regulating their economic life” (p.11). The implication is that the role of government emerged in the colonist’s thinking shaped by these interests and so the shape of the federal union came about not by forward looking design, but by the gradual accommodation of conflicting interests. Skillen traces the authors’ survey of state government involvement in economics, in inter-state trade, and the near-anarchy that resulted, which in time meant greater support for a more unified solution. The US emerged as a union defined by, and brought into existence from, economic forces motivated, in the main, by enlightened self-interest. The new union did not solve all problems but it has held and the Constitution now provides some testimony to what might be possible in other regions of the world, such as contemporary Europe, where the federalizing process is at work.

207. “Christian Politics?” letter to Editor First Things October.

(see No.210 Skillen on Curry). Dean Curry, Professor of Political Science at Messiah College has reviewed Skillen’s book The Scattered Voice (No. 192) in First Things June/July 1991, 49-51. This is a sharp exchange based on Skillen’s (justifiable) complaint that Dean Curry has seriously misrepresented his view
having given a rather dismissive review that considers it an analysis of the “scattered voice” of evangelicals. Clearly Curry’s review gets it wrong and he can’t bring himself to admit it in his reply. The problem seems to be that Curry used the review as an opportunity to promote his own version of post-Reinhold Nieburhian political realism as the genuine alternative that Skillen had missed in his analysis. It may well be that Curry’s version of prudential Christian realism does not feature among the various realist views that Skillen discusses in The Scattered Voice and the exchange does exhibit the kind of bitterness that often prevails even in the Christian academic milieu in “Christian America”. Curry’s review seems more concerned with suggesting, in a rather pompous way, that Skillen join him in advocating Curry’s view - he says in his reply to Skillen’s letter: “I believe my friend is misguided, however, in his quest to define a uniquely Christian third way.” Curry says he wants to advocate a prudential, rather than a theological, politics and so assumes that Skillen has tried to subordinate political theory to theology.


Skillen’s philosophical colleague, Dr Danie Strauss, would immediately note that the title of this essay has kinetic analogies. This is not to suggest that thinkers who know nothing of Dooyeweerd are incapable of making use of such seemingly contradictory concepts in a coherent way. But it does illustrate how a philosophy can support the kind of intellectual flexibility that is demonstrated in the title of this CLSQ article. This was written more than 25 years after his doctoral Dissertation (No.12). God is shrinking the world so we can see more clearly its simple unity under His dominion; He claims it all. This is no “Dooyeweerdian” claim, but it is a view that comes to expression in Dooyeweerd’s philosophy. The article concludes with reference to Pope Leo XIII’s famous encyclical Rerum Novarum which in 1991 was in its hundredth year. It sparked Catholic political and economic reform efforts in Europe. It was indeed worthwhile to examine this teaching in the 200th anniversary year of the American Bill of Rights. At the bottom of the page is a note about the Christianity and democracy conference that had been promoted by the Center for Public Justice.

209. Editor, Preface and Introduction (9-10, 11-22) to Abraham Kuyper The Problem of Poverty Baker.

This is a new edition of a speech originally given by Abraham Kuyper in 1891 and translated by Dirk Jellema and published as Christianity and the Class Struggle (1950). Skillen wrote the new Preface - Kuyper is not presenting a technical or academic paper. He aims to illuminate a complex problem and to inspire his audience to action. In the Introduction Skillen explains the significance of the speech in its centennial year. While it may be true that various forms of communism and socialism are currently in decline, no one can ignore the present reality of poverty, social dislocation, urban growth and squalor, unemployment, and family breakdown. All of these exist today, throughout the world, on a scale much larger than that of one hundred years ago.

This is not simply an antiquarian interest in a remarkable Christian document. The purpose of publication is to challenge the view that Christianity is out of date and powerless to address the complex questions of poverty today.


See No. 207 Skillen’s reply to Curry’s review of Skillen (No.192).

This review comes one month after the First Things exchange between Curry and Skillen. The first thing that Skillen concedes is that the book should not be criticised because it was written pre-1989 - a great deal of it seems far more dated than it might otherwise have been. This concession is balanced by Skillen’s
recognition that Dr Curry might feel that the book’s underlying assumptions and argument have been substantiated by present historical developments.

Democracy and freedom seem to have a new chance in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The Persian Gulf War shows the United States standing firmly behind Israel. The US appears to be ready now, after two decades of indecision, to use strong force to back up its goals in the world.

All of this is to Curry’s liking. In other words, Curry’s book arrives at a time when “prudential realism” might appear to have scored significant victories. There is a significant issue to examine: since his earliest publications, Skillen had been criticizing political realism (since No.28, No.29 and No.30).

His critique defined realism as that mentality dominant in the study of international politics which considers questions about principle to be quite outside the realm of empirical analysis of foreign policy.

Realism is simply blind to its own ideals. The notion of “national self-interest” is simply flagged through without any further ado. And this is the underlying “assumption complex” that gives Skillen’s subsequent outline of the book (in 6 paragraphs and one crucial quote) it’s coherence.

211. Editor with Rockne McCarthy Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society No 2, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion, ed. J Witte, Scholars Press. (No. 467 below Chinese translation)

This is a reader on social pluralism. This project began more than a decade ago when Skillen and McCarthy confronted the need in both academic and political circles for a book like this.

It began at Dordt College in the late 1970s when both were on the Dordt faculty and co-operated on “the project to develop a Reader to explore the contemporary significance of principled pluralism for our society and the contemporary world” (see No.48, No.51, No.62. No.66).

This book aims to promote a social/ political/ perspective that is lacking in the circles of mainstream American pragmatism and individualism. Their joint editorial work is also to be found in the following written contributions to the book: Introduction: The Question of Pluralism, 1-27; Chapter I The Weight of History - an introduction to the readings, 31-40; Chapter VII The Recent Catholic Tradition - an introduction to the readings, pp.137-142; Chapter XIII Progressive Calvinism - an introduction to the readings, 229-233. In Part Four - The Views of Social Pluralism: A Critical Evaluation] Chapter XIX History, the Unfolding of Human Society, and Human Fulfillment pp.357-76; Chapter XX Subsidiarity, Natural Law, and the Common Good, 377-395 Chapter XXI Sphere Sovereignty, Creation Order, and Public Justice, 397-417 Epilogue, 419-421.

The introductions to the various sections of the reader work from and develop 1979-1981 essays published in Pro Rege, Dordt College’s faculty magazine.


The actual contribution of both editors is not delineated in the volume - clearly some passages can be ascribed to each from comparison with their respective contributions to Pro Rege.

Excerpts from this book have been published.

See No.311, No.312, No.320.
1992


This article for *The Banner* is written similar in style to the piece for *Moody Monthly* (No.180). At the conclusion of the 3 page feature article is a note from the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee itemizing the nine programs started for poor inner city people across the United States. The article is a piece of “practical sociology” explaining some of the statistics on child poverty. Skillen calls upon readers to look outside their walls and makes some practical suggestions about how Christians can work together to assist Prison Fellowship in its programs of “restorative justice”, or organizing local groups to assist needy people in providing services like child-care and transportation where none exist. Suggestions are given to make contact with local government and assist cities in delivering assistance. The article emphasises the importance of “local politics.” Much of what our cities need depends on changes in state and federal laws, not simply on the actions of local governments. Nevertheless, the local government remains the chief coordinator for life in the urban public square. Local public laws need changes - some radical. Christian citizens need to take up their civic responsibilities with new vigor. And they need to do so in connection with their other institutional responsibilities, not in isolation from them. We cannot pretend to be alive and happy in our families and churches, satisfied merely with offering small ministries of mercy, while the cities in which we live or work are falling apart from rotting structures.


Republished 14 September 2012. A piece written to encourage *PJR* readers to avoid the confirmed trend in election campaigns. It is also a strong recommendation to readers that they get involved in political reform efforts to promote genuine proportional representation (PR). “The time has come for us as citizens to quit looking for an individual political savior and to get back to the hard work of being citizens. Even if electoral reform is not possible in the near future, we must take organized action ... to define a sound, comprehensive program for public-interest government.”


A meditation on the challenge presented to Christians by the ongoing persistence of poverty at home and abroad. Despite the seeming end of communism, amidst widespread rejoicing, and at times western self-satisfaction, Skillen injects a realistic note. But our thanksgiving should be tempered by a hard look at reality - not only in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, but also in the United States and the Third World. The poor are still with us. Western governments’ gradual bridling of capitalism over the past century has helped put a stop to grinding domestic poverty on a vast scale, but urban and rural poverty remains a hideous experience for millions of people. Two quotations explain the generosity that inspires Christian reform efforts. One is from Abraham Kuyper The Problem of Poverty (1891) (see No.209) and the other from John Paul II’s Centesimus Annus (1991). What we need is a richer, more global Christian social perspective.


This two page article for Evangelicals for Social Action discusses political leadership. It concentrates upon Presidential Candidates George H W Bush (a man fit for presiding), Bill Clinton (He looks like a man who knows that a new Democratic agenda is needed. But like Bush, he does not appear to have a team ready to lead), Pat Buchanan (the soldier-patriot mouthing populist vigor ... a near-Nazi) and Jerry Brown (he will likely prove to be a minor figure). It was
written before Ross Perot emerged as a serious candidate. The overall thrust of the article is that the US is at a point in its history where real leadership is needed. A mere “presiding” president will not be enough. Americans are looking for leaders qualified to practice statecraft - able to shape the nation into an up-to-date model of democracy... The times in which we live call for more than a presiding official. They call for one who can help us shape a new and better political order in a rapidly changing world. Thus, the article is Skillen’s attempt, as a political scientist, to sketch the overwhelming desire of the American citizenry for leadership after the collapse of the Communist empire. The tone of the article is also positive. Skillen does not believe it is all hopeless. Real political leadership can be found even if it will not be an easy task. Such candidates need to have a grasp of the times in which they live, to have a comprehensive vision and program grounded in justice and be capable of team leadership.


This is a brief and useful critique of the view of Berger and Neuhaus who, in critique of modern individualism, advocate a sociology that makes room for "mediating structures". In Skillen’s terms they did this to counter the views of modern individualists [who] act as if the only authoritative human powers that exist are individuals and governments. The concept of mediating structures, according to Skillen, is an important step in the right direction. But first there are some problems which require systematic and critical theoretical analysis. "Mediation" implies two poles - the sovereign individual at one side and the sovereign government on the other. Not only does this uncritically retain a means-end frame of reference within social thought and analysis, it merely modifies the utilitarian framework - albeit in a more pluralist direction - rather than replacing it with a fully pluralist/pluriform vision of social reality. In effect, Skillen utilizes a three-fold distinction developed by Dooyeweerd to demonstrate that the "mediating structures" concept cannot adequately account for the social reality of institutions, organisations, associations and networks of complex, variegated relationships. The concept does not allow for a distinction between institutions and associations. A family is no mediating structure, at least not like a professional association which is set up to negotiate between those it represents and government.


This conference became a moment of intense controversy for that stream in the North American “reformational movement” claiming to build upon the teaching of H Evan Runner of Calvin College. Two of his students, Hendrik Hart and Jim Olthuis, stirred intense and bitter controversy by the manner in which they “outed” themselves as advocates of gay rights. The exact character of confrontation has never been adequately explained.

The manner in which they chose to make their views public still has reverberations 15 years later. And so this address - by an American, who like Runner also trod a path from Wheaton College to Westminster Seminary to the Free University of Amsterdam, and then back to the US - is significant now for what it can tell us about another perspective that was raised on that occasion.

The paper begins with a quote from President Vaclav Havel about the true significance of the fall of communism. There are, indeed, good reasons to fear that the new era will produce more disorder than order, more injustice than justice. Skillen is not indulging opportunistically in a millenarian viewpoint. To the contrary. Politically speaking, it seems to me, very significant changes are required in our approach to statecraft, international relations, and transnational institution building.
And then self-critically, with what might now be read as a critical statement aimed at the Hart/Olthuis disclosures, Skillen writes: A deeper and more enduring difficulty with the quest for a new world order is that most of us in the West do not yet appear to be ready to turn a critical eye on the flaws and contradictions in our humanistically closed approach to politics. The demonstration of Communism’s failure is taken as the proof that the old liberal world order view is still valid. Yes, says Skillen, the politics dominant in the West may have had more room for diverse forms of decision-making and differentiated responsibility. Haval notes that the soil of Western political action is now depleted, and the mainstream of modern, humanistic scientism has led to a dead end... 


The first thing to notice in Skillen’s chapter is the complete absence of any discussion of the concept of “the common school” - this is not the author’s problem but it does suggest that the editing of the book proceeded in a somewhat ad hoc fashion. In this chapter there are, of course, strong indications of the historical and philosophical roots of the common school. But the overall point of the chapter is to examine the assumptions of liberalism and the leading assumptions guiding the current criticism of liberalism. Material from the Introduction to the published reader (No.211) is developed and edited in this chapter. The neo-Aristotelian and Thomist views of Alasdair MacIntyre are considered as well as the communitarianism of Michael Walzer.

The sections are: Christianity: A Way of Life - With respect to the state and its public laws in particular, I will argue that from a Christian point of view normative justice for a pluralistic-differentiated society is antithetical both to the liberal ideal of tolerance and to classical ideals of a hierarchical or undifferentiated society; The Crisis of Enlightened Liberalism - Liberalism is a project that has now faltered; A Short Detour Through Jeffrey Stout’s Stereoscopic View of Society

Stout’s criticisms of MacIntyre’s individualism emphasizes the elements of agreement which, for Stout, means that our social order as a whole is more rational and less fractured than MacIntyre fears. Stout’s “stereoscopic” view sees diversity and integration in a pragmatic social perspective. He doesn’t want to be a relativist, but his analysis doesn’t seem to provide a firm ground for the various social sectors he is keen to identify; The Differentiation of an Integral Creation Order - The political order should not be mistaken for a total hierarchical “whole” of which all other social spheres are “parts”. This leads to an explicit argument about what ought to be the structure of government policy for education; Toward a Christian Philosophy of Public Justice and Educational Equity - When parents are recognised as the proper principals in the education of their children, a substantial step has been taken toward treating all families with equitable respect. Government-run schools are not the sole legitimate agents of public education; Conclusion - Christians have much work to do in many places if obedience is to flourish and justice promoted. In the public-legal realm Christian political philosophy [should] clarify the demands of public-legal justice in a differentiating world, since obedience in the political realm will meet happily and coherently with obedience in every other realm and will bear witness to God’s providential and redemptive purposes for his whole creation... Radical reform is needed, not just hope for liberal progress. The chapter gives emphasis to structural and normative thinking. The fact that the term “common school” is not used, leaving it the focus of another chapter in the book, makes it clear that public justice is not about identifying one or other social form as the cause or focus for injustice. Nevertheless the absence of discussion about the “common school” and the political implications of its necessary reform, is surprising.

The essay summarises American education history with *A Brief Glance Backward from Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann*. But securing the right to private freedoms does not establish public justice. And so the chapter continues in terms of *Doing Justice to Education in a Complex Society*. Skillen argues that “doing justice” is not just the simple matter of pushing the public justice buttons. It is a complex social reality which needs all social relationships to be rightly and justly defined. The education process must be looked at in comprehensive terms. The next section of the chapter *Toward a System of Freedom with Justice in Education*. The discussion is about parental principalship in the light of the US Constitution and the decisions of the Supreme Court.

In summary Skillen concludes: Governments will always need to make laws to protect the public, and they may need to do many things in order to promote an educated citizenry. But all such actions should be based on prior foundations of justice that recognize the independence of families and schools. Government’s consequent actions to promote the public good should build on the recognition of the right of parents to choose schools for their children without any financial or legal discrimination.


This is another of Skillen’s “academic” papers, written for a scholarly readership. As with his other writings in which the dominant tradition is evaluated from a Christian political perspective, this paper analyses the current problematic facing Europe and does so with a series of questions about how integration is going to be achieved. The guiding vision is spelled out in these terms: it could probably best be described as a federally integrative, globally attentive composite of the best of the Christian democratic tradition freed from all past Roman imperial ingredients.

Christianity holds that the universal rule of God through Jesus Christ is transcendent and global in character and cannot be created on earth in a parochial, European, holy Roman empire. Thus, Christian democratic federalists can humbly reject all past ideals of a European Imperium and concentrate on leading the way to a fully representative, federal political order that puts a united Europe more completely at the service of a justly differentiating and integrating world community.


This is a report of the speech given at the “National Town Meeting” and 15th Anniversary Celebration, September 18 &19. The speech has been available in video format and printed in roneo-ed style by the APJ for general distribution. This is an after dinner speech for the CPJ faithful.

The video was of a “Town Meeting” (September 18 and 19 1992) and the Third Way account draws from a “recent article” for its October 1992 edition. The roneo-ed form of the speech “It’s time for a second tea party - no more politics without representation” refers to “the most recent US election on November 3” in which Ross Perot became a significant third candidate.

This follows rather closely the speech delivered at the town meeting. We’ve had enough politics without representation. It’s time to renew democracy from the ground up - with proportional representation.
Skillen explains that his purpose in writing *The Scattered Voice* (see No.192) was not to focus upon the “theological or sociological” differences among Christians but to provide an outline of the diverse “specific political perspectives, movements, leaders, or publications.” The book was envisaged as his effort to enlarge public debate in which the Association for Public Justice could then participate by putting forward its own political philosophy. There is ongoing debate about how Christians should act responsibly in the public square and at the same time there is a serious deficit among Christian (and other) citizens as to the need for a unifying “public philosophy”. “The book makes clear my conviction that apart from some deeper political-philosophical basis of Christian agreement, there will never be anything but a scattered Christian voice in the public square.” (see No.109 above).

1993


This is a little booklet to explain the Kuyper lecture initiated by the Center for Public Justice. Since that time there has been quite a lot of American evangelical publishing of Kuypers works and with reflections on his contribution. It’s a fair question as to how Kuypers thought should be viewed as a vitial stimulus to Skillen’s own theorising. But then Skillen recognizes that Kuyper is not the only significant Christian political leader to have appeared in the last two centuries. The brochure outlines the philosophy of the annual Kuyper lecture. The focus is upon comprehending the public order, at home and abroad, from a Christian point of view.

The lectures aim to draw attention to 1. religion as a driving force in historical development; 2. Christ, the light of the world whose call requires whole-hearted obedience in all of life lived within a single creation order - in what sense should the Christian hope of final redemption give realistic shape to worldly politics, which often appears to be controlled more by sin than by redemptive hope?; 3. An international Christian community which is also called to serve globally as much as locally since Christ Jesus is the Lord of all lords, the King of all kings.


This is Skillen’s contribution to a book based on the “Christianity and Democracy” conference held at Emory University in November 1991. He was not one of the featured speakers and this appears to be the fuller version of a speech he gave at the opening convocation to explain to those gathered the purpose of the conference. It is set forth in an historical context, framed with quotations provided by Jean Bethke Elshtain and John Hallowell about the historically important work of serving God politically. It also draws on Herman Dooyeweerd’s analysis of the inner tension in the humanistic ground-motive between the search for personal freedom and desire to maintain total control over the course of events. The time is ripe for fresh Christian democratic thinking, Skillen says. In the USA pro-nation can seem to mean anti-government; some seek freedom from government control while others believe the search for freedom must start with government initiative; individualist contractual views of the social order confront traditionalist communitarians who want to restore hierarchy.

A Christian democratic approach to politics must reconcile these extremes not by trying to steer a middle course between them but by articulating a full picture of
political order in a complex society. Human development is inextricably linked to historical development and Christians should affirm the good creation order by which God calls things into service. Echoing Bernard Zylstra, Skillen notes: God created the world for human historical development leading to an ever more complex society. In a Christian democratic view, Government has to identify all that pertains to political life. It's authority is limited to maintain public justice and the political order is a public trust of the commons to be administered with that in mind. A Christian democratic view must adopt a normative and structural viewpoint of the task of government so that when government actions forms what is going on in other structures it does so strictly in terms of its own normative responsibility. Christian democratic politics is as much local as it is national, international and global. Confident of the creation’s normative order, wary and realistic because of human sin, and thankfully hopeful because of God’s redemptive work in history, Christians will take political life seriously as a public trust, a truly common wealth, while at the same time refraining from the absolutization of politics as means to inhuman ends.


see No.205 above.

226. Editor, and author of “Introduction” (7-12) and Chapter 4 “Educational Freedom with Justice” (67-85) and Conclusion (87-96) The School-Choice Controversy: What is Constitutional? Baker.

This is a book that seeks to contribute politically to the “school choice” controversy that was alive because of Supreme Court rulings and ongoing efforts to overcome the structural injustice that is perpetrated to non-government schools within the American polity. Skillen’s Introduction provides the history of the November 1991 conference in Tacoma, Washington, jointly sponsored by the University of Puget Sound Law School and the Washington Federation of Independent Schools. Skillen’s contribution (pp.67-85) is essentially the argument presented previously (see No.219, No.199, No.218). The Conclusion is written with Supreme Court judgments pending. Everywhere the issues are the same: how to improve learning for all children, especially for those who are poor and have little or no choice about the highly inadequate schools many of them now attend. The chapter continues with an examination of the Zobrest and Lamb’s Chapel cases against the background of the late nineteenth century “Blaine amendment” which can be found in many state constitutions [and which] prohibits government aid to all “sectarian” activities including religious schools. A voucher system would redress much of the current injustice. Not until religious freedom is fully respected in the education of all children will the school-choice controversy find a fair and equitable resolution.


According to ERIC (Education Resources Information Center <http://eric.ed.gov>) this article is the “No” case in a two-part consideration of “Character Education” written by Skillen (The “yes” case was by Thomas Lickona). It “provides a point/counterpoint investigation into appropriateness of character education as a function of public schools. Lickona describes the implementation and success of various character education curricula across the country, while Skillen suggests that public schools may not be sufficiently pluralistic in their approach to support such education, thereby alienating some of their constituents.”
Developing an argument in the context of Roman Catholic educational reflection about the responsibilities of public schools, Skillen builds his case by illustrating how schools are prevented from adequately dealing with “character education” because government is intent upon policies that enforce artificial uniformities upon schools and children which in fact is a subversion of the parental authority to raise children. “Americans not only lack agreement about the values children should learn, but also disagree about the institutional arrangements for inculcating those values. Under these conditions, therefore, it seems to me that my answer to the original question must be a firm “no”. Education by its very nature requires character training and the teaching of moral values, but public schools as currently structured are incapable of doing that task.” This “wholesale reform package” should not be interpreted as an abstract and isolated political theory but as a policy for educational justice. Unfortunately, the abstract declension from the multiple responsibilities that citizens have, apart from their civic responsibilities, is promoted by the kind of non-pluralist, majoritarian policies that are promoted throughout American society.


This article is another in Skillen’s effort to promote political education within his denomination, many members of which support the work of CPJ. It also serves as a statement informing the membership of the ongoing work. The prevailing assumption behind the article, is the contra-nationalist viewpoint that he had been developing since his “America First” articles for NACPA in 1973-4 (see No.9, No.11, No.14). It’s a brief overview of American and Canadian involvement in the international response to various crises, pointing out that it is important for all nations to realise that they have international responsibilities - it’s OK to help, he writes, seeming to imply that many may assume that since the old order of communism is now dead, then the peoples of the world can simply get on with their business without dealing with the uncertainty, confusion and disorder that had its source in the Soviet Union. Skillen reminds his CRCNA readers that two principles are clear: No country may intervene at will in other countries; all governments share responsibility for international law and order. He does not under-estimate the difficulties - Bosnia and Somalia are cited as two examples where help is needed but the structure of helping is not always clear cut. The article is a low-key reminder of complex international relations that cannot be avoided. The US and Canada as rich countries are not the world’s police force. However both countries (CRCNA is a denomination that cross the border) do share responsibility with other countries to establish and uphold international justice. God’s transcendent authority not only calls for such involvement, but makes such involvement possible.


This is an academic paper directed at the latest contributions by the Bellah group in The Good Society, about the latest twist in the seeming crisis-ridden history of liberal social perspective. Alan Wolfe had made the observation, “No longer is a liberal theory of the state linked to a conservative theory of society ...” In this context, where the Welfare State is seemingly continually under threat, Skillen notes the inability of the American polity to sustain anything but undifferentiated moral argument. The Good Society seeks to overcome individualism with a notion of the "common good", but they return again and again to a largely undifferentiated idea of democratic participation throughout society to make possible “justice in the broadest sense” - the good of the whole. An appeal to democratic values for social participation does not actually constitute an advance if there is no recognition of the structural and normative contexts in which such participation is to overcome individualistic fragmentation. Undifferentiated moral
argument seems to be utilized on all sides of the debate about homosexual rights. At this point in time homosexual political activism was calling for the breaking down of every barrier in society that stands in the way of homosexual practice, which simply means that a demand is being made that homosexual morality should prevail in public life. Those opposed want homosexuality banned altogether. The missing link in both arguments is the intermediate distinction (differentiation) of the public, civil domain, on the one hand, from institutions and communities such as families, churches, schools, and friendships on the other. The political argument that Skillen puts forward is one about social space for all citizens to entertain and practise certain moral beliefs and codes.


This is an assessment of the prospects of the emergence of a Christian democratic political perspective in the “new Europe” after the implosion of the Soviet Union. It is set forth in historical terms, and is an implicit warning against European reliance upon the USA as to the character of the “open society” that Christian democrats should pursue. The argument is subtle identifying the post-Medieval background of the kind of Christian democracy envisaged by the 17th and 18th century founding of the colonies that became the USA. Since then the USA has effectively generated a polity in which nationalism and liberalism have become the dominant US political ideologies, “leaving little room for the growth of a distinctively Christian-democratic approach to politics.” Skillen suggests that “the time is ripe for fresh thinking and biblically inspired approaches to law and politics” in which “a wise and careful Christian democratic approach needs to show systematically why democracy cannot stand solely on the basis of a self-generated desire for freedom and power.” “Constitutionally limited, democratic political systems will be able to emerge and maintain legitimacy only if they rise to meet the enduring demands of justice that bind God’s creatures to the exercise of responsibility in today’s highly differentiated societies.”

1994


This document is a significant milestone. It represents an advance in CPJ’s efforts which, from the outset, sought to foster a growing sense of Christian communal consensus about politics, rather than ambiguous confusion (No.31). He had then said in the light of a growing interest in Kuyper’s “political theology”: Thus we are left with some confusion and ambiguity as to whether the Church should attempt to disciple the state into conformity with the Church’s own standards or whether it should seek to aid the state in the development of its non-ecclesiastical standards.”

It may also be read to indicate new aspects, or a new phase, in Skillen’s own theoretical development. The need for an accurate understanding indicates an emergent theme in Skillen’s writing about the task of Government to accurately define the persons, structures and things in terms of which its own calling to establish and maintain public justice is to be fulfilled.


Here Skillen assumes that his readers are, like himself, prone to activism. The first sentence notes that the exercise is a self-critical one. Activism is a built-in aspect of the American national psyché. Nothing about this topic, it seems, to me, can be taken for granted or assumed to be normatively self-evident. He argues that activism in the American polity will itself be reformed if authentic
Christian political thinking and responsibility can emerge with clearly thought-out policies for political reform. An Christian alternative to the undifferentiated moralism will not emerge if its concern are limited to one-at-a-time causes. Life is religion, says Skillen. Perhaps proper activism at this moment in American history is to work for the radical reform of the current system in which traditional activism occurs. He then outlines his alternative:

“So, my thesis is very simple, but its implications require careful judgment arrived at day after day by a community of people who share a sense of historical responsibility and are willing to allow biblical revelation to illumine the entire political path along which they walk as they seek to answer God’s call. In the biblical, covenantal framework our political responsibilities are part of us as God’s image bearers.”

Skillen admits his position is a minority one - there is scriptural basis for a mode of political action that goes beyond protest and pragmatism, beyond mere interest-group accommodation and moralistic activism.

Explaining that such a view should be comprehensive with a differentiated focus, Skillen proceeds to outline how his view would promote electoral reform.

This is a development of No.36, No.50 and the later statements of Chapter 10 “Public Discourse and Electoral Representation” in Recharging the American Experiment, No.236 and Chapter 8 “Citizenship and Electoral Reform” in In Pursuit of Justice No.341 (2004).

A significant change to PR in American national politics would, from a christian standpoint, represent both a principled political reform for all citizens and a means through which a more responsible, biblically-thorough mode of political action could become possible.


This is an extensive review. Carter wants Americans to get back on track by unbanning religion in a way that will also save America’s liberal democracy. Skillen’s analysis of Carter’s “boldness” has a boldness of its own. By drawing attention to Carter’s wish to “save liberal democracy”, Skillen discerns Carter’s goal and in that sense is able to identify the ambiguities in his position; a tension between radical and critical analysis on the one hand and cautious policy suggestions that retreat from any wholesale reform suggestions on the other.


Again this is a piece, this time for an Orthodox Presbyterian Church readership, about the integral connection between Christian discipleship and civic responsibility. Politics is not just Skillen’s “thing” as if it is something like a full-time hobby. To defend himself and his work against this kind of view he develops an exposition of John 15 (the vine and the branches - it is about life as a whole, about practicing love for one another as an expression of God’s love for us) and Hebrews 10:19-25 (The great need Christians have is for mutual encouragement so they can learn together how to pursue love and good deeds.).

This is a call for heavy-duty fruit bearing. The Christian life is an all-or-nothing life. Christ is Lord of all. Politics and government are a part of that “all”. Therefore, we should move on to the meat of God’s Word and learn how to serve him and our neighbours maturely in politics and government as well as in every other area of life.

This is an abridged version of No.156, which expanded an earlier papers, including one written for “A New Agenda for Evangelical Thought” conference sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Christian Studies and the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicalism, Wheaton College June 2-6, 1987. (No.116, No.143).

The essay deletes the first few pages of the Philosophia Reformata article (No.156) which was a theoretical introduction that had the hallmarks of an argument formed within an academic context about the proper location of political science in relation to the other sciences in the college curriculum.

1. What is the political? Political science is a multifunctional entity science, not a mono-functional or modal science and it stands in need of a definition of the state; 2. What constitutes a science of politics? This question raises three levels of scientific abstraction: i) how is such abstraction to be performed? ii) How can the State and interstate relations be abstracted from all other things in the world? iii) How can the multiple functions of political order be isolated and abstracted? 3. The third level of abstraction is about distinguishing the “acting subjects, the objects, and the defining norms (or response-demanding standards) of political life.”

The chapter calls for scholarly team-work that is both professional and international to advance a political work that honours Jesus Christ.


In what respects is America experiencing a political crisis of moral/legal proportions? This is Skillen’s articulation of a “principled pluralist” answer to that question, his contribution to the debate that had been gathering momentum over a decade by, among others, Stephen Carter (No.233), Richard John Neuhaus and Peter Berger (No.196, No.216), Robert Bellah et al (No.229), Alasdair MacIntyre (No.218), and Robert Booth Fowler (No.190). The book is in three parts: Part I: Politics, Morality and Religion which describes in historical terms the cacophony and the alleged crisis as well as the persistent emergence of what Skillen calls “undifferentiated public-moral discourse”; Part II: Rights, Responsibilities and Jurisdictions which is a case for a just public-legal order that is built on the recognition of structural and confessional pluralism; Part III Reforming the American Polity looks at some of the concrete political and legal consequences of “principled pluralism”, in terms of morality, religious freedom, schooling and electoral reform.


One might conclude that in giving his critique of the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics, that Skillen has left none of its clauses standing. But this might give the impression that he is simply dismissive of this attempt at formulating a Christian approach to economics for the post-cold-war era. Overall his article is the result of looking critically at each of the Declaration’s sections and by pointing to some of the key paragraphs, and highlighting ambiguities and assumptions that require “much more work to be done.” One cannot help concluding that Skillen had, by this time, become critical of an evangelical fashion, which tended to equate “action” with the formulation of unifying
declarations. Such declarations need not hide the underlying theoretical
differences of its signatories, but this one does, leaving the impression that the
declaration is caught falling between its confessional and analytical / scientific
aspirations. Skillen emphasizes the fact that, since Christian unity is not based in
theoretical insight, it is not necessary to try to overcome the differences in
economic theory that mean that the signatories tend to adopt different
theoretical and philosophical standpoints. Skillen does not deny the good work
that has been achieved in the efforts allied to this declaration. While I am
criticizing these somewhat superficial appeals for good to be done, I should point
out that the conferees who signed this declaration also spent considerable time
developing a separate document that is more detailed in its attention to “credit-
based income generation programs.” I will not comment on that document here,
but perhaps in its greater detail the reader will find ideas, principles, and a
framework of argument that is illustrative of how one might deal with these other
issues that the group touched on so lightly.

and the American Polity University of Tennessee Press, 240-252.

As with No.237 and at various other times, Skillen is the final contributor to this
volume, providing a critical conclusion and overview of the exchange between
the various participants who had been brought together by the Calvin College
sponsored Conference on Christianity and Politics. The conclusion begins in this
vein: The preceding chapters succeed in demonstrating once again the
complexity of America’s struggle to legalize religion. At the surface of the
dominant public ideology, everything seems simple and uncontentious: church
and state have been separated throughout the United States; thus, the free
practice of diverse faiths flourishes apart from governmental interference while
politics and the processes of making law unfold as nonreligious practices, free of
ecclesiastical bondage and unhindered by religious warfare. But that is not the
reality. At least, the reality of the above description of America’s “religion puzzle”
is that most Americans are educated to view the above ideal state of affairs as
desirable. The word religion is actually used most often in public discourse not to
say anything about the nature of different religions but to debate the legal place
of diverse religious practices. In other words, the public debate over religion is,
for the most part, a debate about how the political order should recognize - and
either approve or disapprove - various practices of different religions. Skillen
explains that this needs to be said because some of the book’s essayists assume
that religion is a clearly recognizable subject. But it is not. Because Americans
practice different religions in different ways the assumption that there is an
isolable generality called religion will not work. The complexity and diversity of
religious life will not yield to the unilateral imposition of a simple schema that
divides life between religious and non-religious spheres.

Skillen expects that he will have to defend his position in the context of civic
debate. “I will have to explain in some detail why I believe that people living
under such a constitution ought to have the civil right of practicing their religions
not only in churches but in the ways they organize their families, educate their
children, conduct their businesses, and so forth. All of this, I will want to show,
can be done with the full and equitable support of government as long as
government is fair and evenhanded in its treatment of all citizens.” With Madison,
Skillen says that “the right to practice one’s religion in accordance with
conscience” is so fundamental that civil rules lack authority “to interfere with it
unless the state’s survival” is clearly at stake. So what happens when a particular
religion is associated with religious movements that make it their aim to
overthrow the state? Skillen concedes that his view conflicts with other views and
that the setting forth of any view must anticipate the debate into which it is
entering.

This article for the Evangelical for Social Action magazine attempts to lift discussion of Government out of a means-to-ends framework. In the process both politics and Government is often demeaned.

What happened in the American polity, explains Skillen, is that the God-given calling of the political community to do justice publicly, has been ignored because of a view that sees leads to “politics for the sake of politics.” This is an unraveling of a popular (if not populist) aphorism that simply closes down debate with “that’s politics!” It is also an examination of the dogma that politics is autonomous or, in secularist-humanistic terms, “sovereign in its own autonomous sphere”.

Skillen’s alternative involves: 1. getting the big picture clear - government as a complex art must deal with more than a isolated and unrelated issues. To the contrary no issue is ever isolated or unrelated to other issues; 2. distinguishing any appeal for public justice from government perpetrated injustice; 3. changing the accepted rules for political rhetoric by respecting contributions of all citizens; 4. promoting differentiated moral discourse in a variety of public discourses; 5. searching for ways to change the basis of political life.


The differences between citizens are both superficial and fundamental and hard intellectual work is needed to distinguish them. Radical disagreement at the foundations should not be ignored with smiling handshakes.

Christians need retraining in public debate, immersing themselves in the arguments of non-Christians to learn why. This is the case with their response to “deconstructive relativists”. Their error, from a Christian point of view, is that they seem to believe that everything is relative. But the moment of truth in their argument is that their own position must therefore be relative. Skillen asks rhetorically: How can such relativism be effectively relativised?

1995


See No.234 above.


This translates into Dutch the major part of No.239 by W Zeldenrust and B S Cusveller.


This edition of Community News has “Faith-Based Community and Economic Development” at its theme. Skillen’s piece is the first in the 6 page newsletter. The basic orientation is stated: We need not go through a long theological argument in order to reach the conclusion that those who hold deep religious convictions about life will interpret all kinds of human responsibility (economic, social, political, familial) as dimensions of their responsibility to God. And if they do, then it is a serious injustice for someone else to try to drive a wedge between the religious and the so-called “secular” aspects of peoples’ lives. This is not to say that one may not distinguish among different institutions and relationships such as family, school, business, government, church and voluntary association. But it is to say that people ought not suffer discrimination and even mockery when they try to live coherent, integral lives by tapping into their
deepest roots. 10 principles have been formulated by various organisations in welfare, overseas aid and policy research in Washington. They are a reminder giving expression to an ideology that assumes that neither government nor market forces can solve all the social problems that exist. Human relationships and communities must themselves be recognized, respected, strengthened and restored, and that means giving far more attention to what people believe most deeply about in defining the meaning of their lives. Background to this article can be found in “Debate over religion and politics intensifies” in Public Justice Report March/April 1995 p.3 (see No.247, No.248).


Excerpted and revised version of No.64 and No.83. This is an excerpt from Skillen’s contribution to an August 1981 conference convened to consider Marxism. The excerpt considers the views of Ernst Bloch and his view of the biblical account of 6 days of creation in relation to the Christian teaching of redemption. Bloch challenges Christianity “straight up”. Skillen lists the crucial questions that can be derived from his analysis of this “religious fantasy”.

Skillen seeks to explain why the Marxist critique of Christianity is so powerful.

What Marx saw when he described religion functioning as an opiate was very close to reality. What Bloch was observing in the world when he misread the Scriptures concerning creation, paradise, and apocalypse were highly dualistic forms of religion. I, for one, am willing to conclude that the Marxist challenge cannot be met by any form of accommodationist Christianity which fails to take this world seriously or fails to take Biblical revelation seriously.

What follows, as counterpoint to the Marxist vision, is Skillen’s discussion of the sabbatical structure of creation. He refers en passant to Bonino and develops a discussion of the nature of human freedom. Marx was correct in relinquishing the Hegelian and liberal ideas of the “rational state”, but he should have done so by way of reconsidering the Biblical view of justice.


Republished below as No.287. This is also Skillen’s assessment of the ongoing work of the Center for Public Justice, a stirring speech aimed to convey something of the all-encompassing biblical vision that has inspired his work. It is an attempt to pull out and call attention to a thread running through the work he has been involved in over the decades. It is an exposition of why he has been busy politically. Our life in this world is connected to life in the age to come because of Christ’s meritorious work. He sees us through to eternal life in a work that is still underway. It is the process of leavening the whole lump, bringing all of creation into its God-intended covenantal relationship.[L]ife in this age and in the age to come is tied together in (is constituted by) a single creation order - the seven days created to reveal God’s glory in the fullness of Sabbath shalom. Thus this article is a further articulation of the view initially set forth in “Politics and Eschatology” (No.39).


This is an important review because it identifies a strong secularising trend in the writings of Jim Wallis. Skillen was surprised to discover that the book was something other than he had anticipated. He expected to read a further
development of a perspective in which Wallis identified a prophetic Christian stand over against those dominant powers and idols of the age that are leading the masses along the broad way to destruction. Instead he found a great deal about an undifferentiated, immanent, political community ... The book breathes the air of civil-religious disappointment out of which the author searches for a new community of moral/spiritual/political inclusiveness. The “we” that Wallis appeals to becomes the key focus of the book. There is an “already” and a “not yet” to God’s Kingdom that requires our recognition of the difference between this age and the coming age. But in The Soul of Politics there is no such distinction. Skillen presents a biblically-oriented view of social inclusion and by way of contrast says that Wallis’ unqualified communal inclusivism in this book does not qualify as a specifically Christian tract. Moreover, those who are not appropriately inclusivistic are the “others” who, ironically, are singled out for denunciation. The question, of course, is how to select the criteria by which to distinguish the universally valid core values which the undifferentiated, all-inclusive “we” can draw out of all traditions, from the mistaken, unworthy, old assumptions, status quo, and ideologies that are still held by those who are wrong, behind the times, and, well, deserving of exclusion. Wallis seems to avoid any appeal to scriptural authority. Lacking are strong arguments to clarify the criteria he uses and to demonstrate the truth of his convictions. The book is a sermon to a church whose one criterion for membership is that its communicants share the desire for a new soul for the undifferentiated political community they all long for.

Skillen says that it is a book that views prophecy, or prophetic spirituality, as a political tool. That seems to suggest that Wallis has accommodated an operationalist world-view to his Christian profession with the result that aspects of the Christian world-view that no longer “fit” the inclusivistic demand simply fall from view.


This is a point-by-point analysis of the Christian Coalition’s “Contract with the Family”. The contract proposes a hodgepodge of privatization, tax reform, inconsistent federal experimentation and symbolic moralism. As short-term political rhetoric it may be effective, but as an agenda for comprehensive legislation and long-term political reform, it is inadequate.

The article considers the “Contract” point by point. The contract suffers from its attempt to weld Christian sentiment to majoritarian winner-take-all electoral morality. Skillen asks, [w]hat if there is not a single morally unambiguous American tradition?

If, instead, the reality is that citizens are significantly diverse religiously, ethnically, and especially politically, then perhaps our political system - particularly the electoral system - needs to be changed in order to do justice to that reality. Isn’t it time to let go of the myth of a single-willed moral-majoritarian polity that can be represented by only one winner?

We need a better way to conduct political debate, elections and lobbying so that all citizens - minorities as well as majorities - can be represented in accord with their actual diversity.

The coalition’s contract confirms that a winner-take-all competition for political power has reached a dead end. Christian should now be working to clarify the principles of a more constructive approach to politics in our pluralistic society.

The Center also distributed an 8-page critique “Civil Religion or Christian Principle?”

The “Cry for Renewal” was a 23 May statement signed by many leading evangelicals and other main-line Christians in reaction to the Christian Coalition’s “Contract with the Family” which was released on May 17. What is needed is political analysis and a political response. That is what Skillen attempted in his article for *The Christian Century* (No.247). The problem is that to sign such a statement puts the signer into a position of reaction rather than constructively contributing to a discussion about the Contract’s assumptions, and it also had a potential to move attention away from the necessary discussion about welfare reform that was then taking place among many Christians. It is a reactionary document, motivated by opposition to the Religious Right.

The Religious Right has shown they can organize. The signers of “Cry” haven’t. Instead of getting together through churches and organizations, calling meetings and spending the long hours that it takes to speak with people at the grassroots, they wanted to produce a document for the press so that people would listen to them. In the end the document reflects a sense of political weakness. The document while seeking its own power condemns the search for power. This is not the basis for a political response to the Christian Coalition.

Again, the word “we” is the focus and in conclusion Skillen says, “I don’t know what that “we” is, and therefore I don’t know how to do what the document wants me to do.”

See *PJR* 1995 March/April “Debate Over Religion and Politics Intensifies”.


The peculiar language of the US Constitution’s Second Amendment reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” Interpretations vary, but I agree with those who say that the primary aim of this amendment is to insure that the States can maintain their own militias and police forces. The purpose is not to guarantee individual ownership of any and all weapons or to protect the personal police powers of each citizen... A balanced, moderate, Christian approach to our polarized American situation begins with the recognition that God has ordained government and not merely individual rights. The problem concerns the deep-seated libertarian view by which many have defined justice in terms of their own lives being protected from government and thus there is deep ambiguity with respect to giving the appropriate respect that is owed to institutional authority.

1996


The one page synopsis of the paper “The Question of Being Human” presented at the Public Justice and Welfare Reform national conference, May 19-20, 1994, is a summary of the material in this chapter. This also represents an important development in the way in which Skillen presents “principled pluralism” as can be seen from the later version of this paper in In Pursuit of Justice one decade later (No.341). Another version “Civil Society and Human Development”, that first appeared in 2002 (No.325), precedes the later version in that 2004 publication. The synopsis begins with a sentence that could have been part of Skillen’s first published paper in 1967 on Karl Jaspers. Basic assumptions about the meaning of life and human nature orient people toward ultimate aims and provides the grounds for their standards of judgment. This is why the crisis in welfare policy is
about the nature of human responsibility, and in particular about the relationship between personal responsibility and government’s responsibility. At the 1994 conference, when the opening night’s lectures were given and questions were invited, the first response was a complaint about the conference’s willingness to use the term “responsibility”, which to the questioner implied a desire to affix blame. The synopsis identifies the internal contradiction in common understandings of welfare recipients... most individuals should be treated by government as free and independent while, on the other hand, poor individuals should be treated as dependent on government because they are not responsible for their predicament, This public ambiguity in language has to do with the undifferentiated moral frame of reference by which most citizens in the US evaluate public life... American citizens do not generally hold a clear idea of the diverse kinds of responsibility people bear in a differentiated society.

Governments sometimes form policies with the aim of helping children but ignore their parents, and sometimes Governments treat adults as if they are children. A clear understanding of human responsibility in a differentiated society is needed recognizing the distinct types of responsibility that belong to human beings at different stages of development and in different kinds of relationships... This then leads on to two important policy principles. The first is that no differentiated institution in society, outside the family, should be allowed to displace parental responsibility for child rearing. The second is that public policies should not treat adults as dependents in a way that would allow the state or some other institution to hold boundless authority over them. Human identity comes from being created in the image of God and this means that people are neither individually self-sufficient nor autonomously self-governing. They are creatures responsible for one another in a diversity of relationships and institutions. Government’s task in a differentiated society should be to uphold public justice, to reinforce the accountability structures in which people hold a variety of different obligations. Governments should do everything possible to encourage and strengthen families for the care of truly dependent children, and likewise governments should refrain from treating adults as if they are children who may be legitimately dependent on government. Much of the discussion concerns the way the family, particularly of the newborn, functions as an undifferentiated community of love within the larger context of a society with differentiated authority. Government policy needs to be able to accurately define healthy development and maturation as an important part of its administration of public justice.


This 30 page summary of Skillen’s doctoral dissertation (No.12) had been anticipated in the footnotes of various publications. See note in the short-lived Kuyper Newsletter (No.58). As stated in that annotation, Skillen had been involved in the Temple University Center for the Study of Federalism “Workshop on Covenant and Politics” presenting a paper: “From Covenant of Grace to Tolerant Public Pluralism: the Dutch Calvinist contribution.” That note says that the main purpose of the paper was to show that although the disestablishment of churches in modern states has been accomplished chiefly through a secularization process that has rejected biblical, covenantal thinking, that process has not been universal. This thesis was developed in the article written with Stanley Carlson-Thies for Publius that Center’s journal (No.77). Skillen explains the 19th century Dutch Calvinist background for “principled pluralism” with its biblically based view of tolerance, including Kuyper’s "unconditional disapproval" of the burning of Servetus. The state is called to fulfill its covenantal obligations before God and this does not require church control of confessional uniformity throughout the realm; this insight however was not gained automatically with what Herman Dooyeweerd identifies as the initial formulation
of “sphere sovereignty” by Johannes Althusius. Max Weber suggested that Kuyper had in some basic sense accommodated Calvinism to this secularisation process. But Kuyper had begun to articulate a concept of tolerant public pluralism which did not require any departure from the covenant of grace. No, says Skillen, this was in fact a formulation of the state’s role which was a consequence of his commitment to that same covenantal approach to life in its totality. This Workshop led to the publication of the four-volume work of Daniel Elazar The Covenant Tradition in Politics. Skillen’s related articles are No.302 “Covenant, Federalism and Social Justice” and No.308 “Can There be Just Politics Without Covenantalism?”. It has already been noted that this paper is referred to in footnote 71 of the paper listed at No.64, “Christian Faith and Political Freedom ...” from a 1981 CLS Conference. There it is said to be a “soon to be published” paper from the Temple University’s Center. It’s title then was “From Covenant of Grace to Tolerant Public Pluralism: the Dutch Calvinist Contribution.” This title is noted as a contribution to then forthcoming volume from Carolina Academic Press, 1985 edited by John Kincaid and Daniel J Elazar (eds) The Covenant Connection: Federal Theology and the Origins of Modern Politics. So, in 1996 the Calvin Theological Journal publishes Skillen’s article with a most interesting and suggestive amendment in the title ie replacing “tolerant” with “equitable”. In many respects this is a summarizing update of the doctoral dissertation (No.12). The amendment to the title shows a shift from “tolerant” as a descriptive term to designate and thereby justify a particular (reformational) understanding of a differentiated social order in an academic context, to a public policy emphasis which argues from a normative structural standpoint - “equitable” assumes a normative requirement qualifying the process of societal differentiation - in Skillen’s Doctoral dissertation he discussed Calvin’s use of the term “equity” (p.189) in terms of the God-given goal for (our formation of) positive laws, natural law and the moral law.


While the book is thorough and clearly written, Flower’s commitment to a narrow definition of religion keeps him from critical reflection on his own and the Court’s problematic assumptions about religion. To argue at one and the same time, as the author does, that religion should be kept separate from civil authority and that religious freedom should be unfettered, leads to a dilemma he cannot resolve: What about unfettered religious freedom in public as well as in private life? Skillen observes, once more, that freedom of religion is restricted by the Court’s presuming to be capable of defining ahead of time that secular (ie non-religious) education is the only education worthy of public support. Flower’s merely assumes that religion is something separable from secular life, and thus advocates legal favor to agree with his general view of religion as necessarily privatized applied to their religious commitment. What he does not recognize is that government’s pretense to secular neutrality itself forces everyone to dance to the tune of a single, publicly imposed definition of religion - a privatizing definition that actually establishes the sacred-secular duality as public truth.

Skillen reiterates his view that government expenditures flowing to a variety of general causes to a variety of providers, regardless of their religious commitment, will not establish all religions, but is the only way of not fettering religious commitment as required by the First Amendment. The book is unconvincing on the proper relation of religion to civil authority although it is competent in dealing with “church” and “state” issues. Government has no mandate to predefine religion to privilege the “strict separationist” view at the expense of all other definitions. This view now needs disestablishment.
Sometimes, particularly when he is considering the part played by the Old Testament, the prophets and the wisdom literature, Skillen’s writings take on the form of prophetic analysis and a “kerygmatic” exposition of a Christian vision for political life in all of its dimensions. In this piece such a style predominates. It is introduced with a review of contemporary global culture, tossed to and fro between the twin idols of science and human personality, from the standpoint of what the Bible testifies concerning God’s love for the world. Skillen turns to Abraham Joshua Heschel. It is from Heschel that Skillen takes his cue: prophecy, critique, action. In reading the prophets on their own terms, Heschel gradually came to see that prophecy is the “exegesis of existence from a divine perspective.” In his study of modern philosophy, Heschel had been confronted with an either/or. Which prophets would he accept as authoritative? Is it going to be Gadamer whose hermeneutics cannot avoid tradition; or will it be Habermas who still believes in the possibilities of historical liberation if criticism of social justice follows an interest and faith in freedom?

The essay is then organised in three distinct sections: II Prophecy taking its orientation from Heschel’s re-reading of the prophets; III Critique, which outlines the biblical view of history fulfilled by God’s redemptive acts, as Heschel is contrasted with Max Horkheimer. The section concludes with a few sentences which re-affirms Skillen’s articulation of a Christian world-view that has stepped outside of means-end realism. IV Action In this section the views of Jacques Ellul are compared with Horkheimer’s recognition of contemporary idolatry, most evident in Zionism and the different forms of nationalism and power politics running their domineering course all over the world. In two final pages Skillen outlines his rationale for responsible action, living as those who belong to this world, as stewards of the earth, as servants of our neighbors in God’s destined creation. Inspired by biblical prophecy, motivated to engage in hopefilled critique in every area of existence, Christians anticipate the fulfillment of their works in the final completion of God’s prophetic revelation of Jesus Christ. They live not as those locked into some historical fate, but as those who believe that the power of Christ who is risen holds their life together while the same assures them prophetically of His coming again.

This article, and the next one (No.256) come from a “Christianity and Democracy in South Africa” conference held in Potchefstroom 10-12 July 1996. Skillen acknowledges that the US and South Africa both experienced immigrant settlements by Puritan-type English and European peoples who subsequently gained such great historical influence that the countries they settled came to be understood by many of their citizens as new Israels in covenant with God. Strong civil religions took hold in both places, leading to highly ambiguous results .... The difficulty for us today is to try to sort out the good from the evil in our histories, learning to hold onto the good while rejecting and overcoming the evil. That is very difficult work for sinners, even for sinners who confess Christ as their redeemer.

What follows is a discussion of the civil-religious distortion of Christianity in modern America ... The last thing I would want to do is to leave you with the impression that I think the American experience of democracy is an ideal Christian model. The discussion then proceeds in terms of The Colonial and Early
Republican Experience (outlining the underlying view of the America experiment and its constitution - those relatively modest settlers soon felt compelled to dislodge and destroy the native Americans in order to secure their small enclaves - and describing how an initial modest search for freedom led to an obsessive drive for more and more power over nature, over natives, and over slaves as the means to an ever increasing prosperity and liberty. The argument is one of an ongoing deformation of Christianity. Still despite that evil, the American constitution gives expression to a form of government that is restrained, limited and defined. Constitutionally articulated civil rights express more than merely an aspiration toward individual freedom; they represent an obligation placed on governments to protect citizens from overreaching, overbearing power. Constitutional rights help define a just state. Skillen then outlines the distinctive characteristics of America’s political heritage (Government should be limited to tasks that protect multiple human responsibilities and such tasks should be codified) which recognize human limits in dependence upon divine authority in contrast with latter-day dialectical-tensions that can be seen in nationalism, libertarianism and the search for complete equality. The part played by the Civil War in making national unity and economic progress the chief goal of American politics is touched upon briefly. In this context Skillen outlines Contemporary “Christian” Efforts, particularly the Christian Coalition (No.247), People for the American Way and Cry for Renewal (No.248). A brief description of The Contemporary Christian Challenge concludes the paper. Slavery in America and apartheid in South Africa were perpetuated by people confessing the name of Christ. We should not be surprised that many people remain skeptical of the idea that Christianity might have something fresh, liberating, and constructive to offer in the political arena. The pluralist perspective that Skillen has been working on is briefly described with a few pages discussing the possibilities of a Christian democratic perspective in redefining the political order as the public trust of a commonwealth. It will have to build on the sound constitutionalism and seek better arguments for structural and confessional pluralism.


The point of departure for this address is in the notion that in contemporary American politics ... politics exists for the sake of politics rather than for the sake of government. (See No.239). A Christian approach to politics cannot line up on the side of politics for the sake of politics, but with a politics that is crafted for the sake of Government. The biblical grounds for this assertion are outlined. And the simple biblical truth that Governments are directly accountable to God is expounded to show that it contradicts one of the basic tenets of American politics, that politics is ultimately accountable to the people and not directly to God. The dangers of this Christian view are canvassed, in the context of a detailed description of the American Political Experiment. A vision of Christian Politics for the Sake of Government is outlined, followed by a discussion of Unity and Diversity in Society Under Government: The Question of Pluralism. This then is followed by a discussion of Justice and the Identity of a Political Order, which includes a larger version of Skillen’s mealtime discussion about scoops of ice-cream and who should wear glasses with his young children. (See No.268)

The failure to identify human beings correctly as persons-in-community and the family as the foremost community for children, when combined with the failure to discriminate properly in law between adults and minor children, leads to the publicly unjust treatment of families and children. The consequence is an unjust state. The concluding section is Natural Law and a Distinctively Christian Politics ... I would urge fellow Christians to go all the way in developing a full-blown view of creation order, fall into sin, and the coming final judgment and
redemption through Jesus Christ, as the explicit and publicly acknowledged basis for their political action,... The normative principles and precepts always remain out ahead of us, holding us accountable, calling us to account for disobedience, remaining incapable of being confined within our positivizations.


See above 240. The Diplomat is a quarterly political and philosophical magazine, published bilingually in both English and Arabic. It specializes in issues concerning between different cultures and civilizations. Its Editor-in-Chief is Mohamed Elhachmi Hamdi and it is published by Al-Mustakillah Publishing House, London. The article itemizes the strange curiosities of history... the shift from conflict to dialogue that has occurred within certain traditions over extended periods of time. One could say that this is a reflection based on a study of “long term history”. One hundred and fifty years ago, it would have been very difficult to convince American protestants that Catholics could be their close political allies. Anti-catholicism was an extremely strong tendency among Protestants, as was anti-Semitism a little later, and as is anti- Arabism today. But if we go back to the times of the great conflict that produced the dominant culture of the United States before World War II, we discover that the conflictual parties were Protestants versus Catholics, and before then Protestants versus other Protestants. And going back from there we can’t help but notice that it was the Protestant reformation in Europe - representing the great internal conflict within Western Christendom - that produced much of what is now recognised as the scientific, technological, industrial and post-industrial forces of modernity. And before that, of course, we come to the rise of Islam, the East-West schism of Christianity, and the Christian break-away from Judaism.

Could it be that it is the power of secularist ideology that keeps Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Muslims in dialogue with each other? Skillen follows that suggestion with another one asking: Are we sufficiently conscious of the fact that Western civilization is in conflict with itself, suffering internal conflict? Conflict is not just between the west and the rest but particularly within the ambit of Western societies. Western self-confidence, as a general ethic, pervading human society, cannot be explained without reference to its biblical and classical origins. But even here there is conflict concerning the way this fact of self-confidence will be interpreted. Is it to be found in over-coming the immature need for God by putting all that religious and mythical nonsense behind us.

Or is it that western self-confidence has become an emptiness because modern secularism ignores the fact that humans never outgrow their need for God? If this internal conflict does characterize Western society then it is worth studying it carefully. Much of what has originated in the West does not belong to the West by proprietary right and should not be claimed exclusively by and for the West. Likewise, much of what now produces conflict within the West should be resolved for the sake of the West as well as for the sake of non-Western peoples. Skillen puts a case for diligent and thorough dialogue between all peoples.


The article comes in a section “Politics '96: Critical Issues”, and takes its cue from Haynes Johnson and David Broder The System, Skillen explains why political responsibility requires candidates (Clinton and Dole) to face the problems endemic within the political system. The crisis of the system is attributable to several factors: parties cannot discipline individual members to reach party agreement on issues; proposals put forward in Congress frequently aim to establish political advantage for the next election; and interest groups can sometimes keep bills from passage or drive politicians of both parties to back
away from certain issues altogether (as both parties have done on Social Security reform).

So why should citizens work to develop new policy alternatives if the political system can no longer process them and move toward meaningful conclusions? Skillen focuses his discouragement on the emergence of a global economy. What I’m looking for, however, are ways to recover real, genuinely representative and vigorously disciplined government, and this means looking for ways to change the system. His plea to the candidates is to add proposals for the reform of the political system to their campaign promises. These would involve a commission to report on the state of electoral and governing systems, on leadership in his party to bring greater discipline to the legislature, to work with Congress. Should laws not be enacted then the candidate should promise to put a proposal for system reform at the top of the party’s campaign next time.


A round-table discussion highlighting various evangelical approaches across the political spectrum. Skillen, as chair, asks: How do we get people to see that we’re in this together? And in part the question is, apart from what the government can and can’t do, how can we get those who are able to help not to think paternalistically - not to do something top-down? Further, if the government has to cut back, what implications has this for churches, families and economic enterprises? Later Skillen’s interceptions, are to steer questions away from contentious theories (about macro-economic viewpoints) to consideration of what is it we can do and to what extent do government changes help that to happen. Skillen notes government’s role to oversee public policy but even if the group is convinced that fundamentally it’s individuals, families, and friends that are going to make the crucial difference for the culture they still have to clarify government’s specific role. There had been purpose in Skillen’s encouragement of the group to discuss what can be done “on the ground” - to get some sense of the full social character of inner urban life in the midst of the crises that surround it, so that the role of government can then be put into context by the “doing of justice.” The discussion is frustrating because of an inability on the part of participants to think structurally when it comes to political concerns.


Drawing on Daniel Philpott’s analysis of the constitution of international relations that took shape after the European Peace of Westphalia, Skillen draws attention to the fact that new states claimed their sovereignty in an international context of assent, which, to some degree, helped constitute the rules and terms of their sovereignty from outside the sovereignty. In other words, the constitution of international relations that emerged with the birth of the sovereign states was to a certain degree transnational and nonarbitrary in character. Sovereignty was not as autonomously sovereign as the word might suggest. Though exercising less power than the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire this reconfiguring of political power within multiple state borders gave each state greater capability of actually establishing public law and order within its borders. Political power was concentrated and delimited. States and churches took on sharper definition. The historical starting point for consideration of the modern question of sovereignty is with the historical reality of a multinational Christendom in which wars, ecclesiastical conflicts, and overseas explorations were leading to the redefinition and reconfiguration of legitimate, competent
political authority. Now the problem is not simply one of coming to terms with differentiation but rather how to redefine politics at a domestic and international level on a global scale that is increasingly differentiated but also increasingly integrated. Skillen’s view is that the very meaning of sovereignty, which has always to some extent been grounded in an international web of legal norms, is becoming qualified more and more by the very thickness of an international network of human relations that requires just governance across and above state boundaries as well as within them.


This is a republication of "The Testimony" *PJR* March/April 1996 in which Acts 24:1-17 is the scriptural passage under discussion. The biblical teaching is that nations and governments belong to God and thus it is also certainly true that the United States no more belongs to secularists or non-Christians than it does to Christians. On the basis of their belief that God is the one who should be respected as above all they may claim their right to citizenship. But the aim of political engagement by Christians is not to claim ownership of the nation, not even if they were to win a majority control in the government. Such control is not a matter of taking back America for its rightful owners; it can only be an occasion for service of all, seeking to contend politically with fellow citizens only for the sake of a more just republic.


This article discusses the problem of the self-designated “religious left”. It takes its cue from a letter of “Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice” supporting President Clinton’s veto of a Congressional Bill, passed by substantial majorities in both houses, of partial-birth abortions. What those signing indicated, could have been said by any individual-rights advocate who believes that the state has no right to interfere in the private decisions of its citizens. The letter writers uphold the pregnant woman - in private consultation with her doctor, her family, and her God - as the one solely responsible for the abortion decision. Skillen pointedly asks about the basis for such a decision. “Why should Christians find it self-evident that sensitivity and compassion should fall on the side of the mother but not on the side of the late-term unborn? These are the political and legal questions that Christians must answer in a clear Christian fashion. I don’t hear the Christian left doing so.” The discussion also examines “Cry for Renewal” (see No.248) which fails to come to grips with the political challenges the authors say they are addressing.


The four books reviewed are indeed representative of various viewpoints. Eastland’s compendium itemizes important Supreme Court religion cases with excerpts from judgments handed down and dissenting opinions, as well other views expressed at the time. It is an ideal assistant for those working in the area. The four books are helpful contributions toward a better understanding of the confusion and diversity of views in American public life. Thiemann and Levy set forth views that presuppose the dominance of a liberal perspective but come to completely different conclusions. The question then is how to make room for both of them - along with many others - in the American political arena. Skillen’s conclusion is that Monsma’s “positive neutrality” in government policy provides the best suggestion for comprehensive civil discourse in public life.
Introducing his discussion, Skillen notes the disagreement at a basic level about whether there is a rational, moral "natural law". In the contribution to this reader which concludes in the top half of the page where Skillen’s piece begins we read, "Natural law is the indispensable basis for an adequate business ethic. It is common to both believers and unbelievers ...” The argument is that because this law "is necessary to avoid antinomianism and its concomitant evils”, then there can simply be no argument about it. So Skillen begins his piece in a way that disagrees with this. The question with which I begin, therefore, is whether an argument for natural law can ever succeed in demonstrating what the argument takes for granted - namely, the reality of a universal moral ground that is supposedly needed in order for business (and other human activities) to be conducted across religious, philosophical, and cultural divides.

The Introduction to the essay thus explains this problematic. The next section Don’t Dismiss the Bible Too Quickly is addressed to Christians who, eager in their discussion to make contact with non-Christians, are willing to put the Bible to one side as they proceed without adequately understanding the way in which their interlocutors want to dismiss what they see as “religious” discussion. The next section Natural-Law Arguments Are Not Neutral explains that there is no such thing as a common or neutral moral argument. In fact, this is one reason why not everyone recognizes natural law or agrees on its meaning. Clarifying Agreements and Disagreements is the next section. Humans are sinners. My own starting point prepares me for disagreement at a very fundamental level, and seeing it deepens my conviction that all humans share both creatureliness and sinfulness. God and the Creation Order is a discussion of how, as part of their work in the world, Christians are to develop a full-blown view of the creation-order, to draw attention by happy, fulfilled, righteous, stewardly, just and loving ways that God’s order for creation is good and perfect. All professional areas provide such challenges to rightly define and respond to what is going on in the world. A Biblical Perspective continues the discussion. Creation norms do not originate with individual or social subjectivity and though universal are not “forms” in the Greek sense. Such norms, as God’s word to us, provide a lamp to our feet to illuminate real life in the world. And human obligation is not something that comes and goes with one generation.

This was the inaugural Kuyper lecture, held at Calvin College. Skillen gives the rationale for initiating this annual lecture, as he begins his concluding reflections. He outlines what the Center should learn from the preceding discussion under various headings. (see No.223 for the rationale behind CPJ’s “Kuyper Lecture”)

The Cross and Triumphantalism: Noll identifies as legitimate the kind of Christian politics that grows from self-denial, that makes no special claims for Christians in this age. Cross and Crown in Tension: Skillen observes that Noll is too quick to place the cross of Christ in tension with a long-standing and admittedly mistaken appropriation of Christ’s crown, Humility and the Meaning of Creation.

Skillen’s reply moves on to the calling God gives us to be servants, also public servants in the political arena. Political responsibility means more than cautious and humble attitudes and requires explanation of why real reform of an unjust status quo is needed; God’s Covenant in Christ: the biblical picture of God’s promise-keeping does not require the “miraculous combination of the particular and the universal” as set forth by Noll; Kingdom Politics: this is politics that avoids civil religion and the idolatrous elevation of any one nation to the status of
God’s chosen. Political humility means a constitutional political order that directly gives proper legal recognition to [the diverse] spheres of society.


This is an early form, in part, of what was published as Chapter 7 “Liberalism and the Environment” in No.341.

The discussion identifies basic weaknesses in America’s constitution with respect to the doing of justice to the eco-system upon which all life on this planet depends. For those who cannot accept the possibility that the American constitution is flawed, Skillen explores the way in which the constitution allowed for slavery rather than preventing it. It allowed African American people to be classified as private property (of slave owners). The basic law had to be changed to remove slaves from slave-owners. These changes did not represent illegitimate governmental interventions into the free market. They were essential steps toward public justice for all people - steps that the government was obligated to take since its calling from God is to establish and uphold justice. And so the first principle of public justice cannot be individual freedom and property ownership. In the above mentioned chapter of In Pursuit of Justice (No. 341) Skillen shows how this was in fact part of the legacy associated with the philosophy of John Locke in the British North American colonies.

And so the struggle to end slavery was not about negotiating with a pressure group; the struggle was about changing the law to ensure justice. The struggle was about reforming a defective constitutional set-up. Likewise with the environment. And Skillen emphasizes that the path of pursuing justice also involves giving correct definitions to all political subjects.

The conclusion of the article, which broaches the possibility that the environmental crisis is not only an indication of a flawed way of doing politics, it indicates a flaw in the constitutional basis upon which politics is undertaken in the American political system. But there is a path of Christian discipleship to be followed here that leads in another direction. In order to be good stewards of the earth, we need to be citizens who work for justice and not merely compete for interests. If we do not find a way to build a just political order that gives legal recognition to certain ecological priorities, then I am not very hopeful about the future governability of the United States.

267. “What’s Wrong With Taxes?” Critique (Ransom Fellowship), 1-2.

“The purpose of the newsletter is to encourage its readers to think, not to tell them what to think.” Ransom Fellowship is a writing, mentoring and speaking ministry of Denis and Margie Haack. The article emphasizes tax payer responsibility to government.

The page includes a caption included for discussion and reflection: “Whine about taxes, dishonor the King.” What does belong to you is a government appointed by God as a servant for your good. Therefore honor it and recognize it as God’s servant and not merely as your servant... We should be happy to pay taxes, thanking God that we still have a government, for government is a gift of God’s grace.... Pay your taxes joyfully. They belong to God’s servants, who belong to God. (originally an editorial in Public Justice Report 19:5 September/October 1996 p.8). Skillen emphasizes a point pertaining to Christian civic conduct with respect to paying of taxes. He draws attention to the fickle character of American disrespect for Government that had actually grown in recent decades on the “conservative” side of politics, not least with “Christian moral majoritarianism” jumping on the “You know better than government how to spend your own money” bandwagon of disrespect.
268. "Advancing a Christian Perspective" [Articles from Public Justice Report arranged by Date" ["The biblical call to social responsibility" (Mar-Apr 1994); "The question of authority" (May-June 1994); "What constitutes a political community" (Sept-Oct 1994); "Government with representation" (Jan-Feb 1995); "Political fairness and equity" (July-Aug 1995); "Government and the responsible society" ((May-June 1996); "Freedom of religion; freedom of conscience" (Nov-Dec 1996)] Centre for Public Justice.

These are republications of articles from 1994-1995 from Public Justice Report and are here also linked to the forms in which they appear from the Center website. These were published in 2009 by NSW Council of Churches.

1997.


Skillen answers the question with respect to the most recent legislation, the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act”, with a qualified “Yes” that is accompanied by a definite "not enough". There are three dimensions of injustice that remain to be addressed. First a simplistic moralistic view that sees government as the cause of poverty, or as the primary solution to the problem. If we do not give up our simplistic moralisms, grave injustice will remain. The second dimension of injustice that needs to be addressed is the public’s declining confidence in government. The third dimension relates to the welfare legislation of 1996 being more about balancing budgets that about creative reform of welfare. What the legislation does is shift the focus off the federal government to the states which are now called upon to initiate welfare reforms. To balance the one-page piece, Skillen lists three positives. More and more citizens and public officials are willing to recognize the importance of non-government service organisations. The roots of poverty often lie beyond the reach of public funding and when more people confront this reality, justice can begin to come into view. Second, there is a growing understanding that poverty is structurally diversified, requiring diversified responses. Third, the Charitable Choice provisions go a long way to doing justice to religion. The article concludes with a call to Christians to think new thoughts and to develop a more comprehensive public philosophy.

270. “Treasuring the Great Artist’s Handiwork” Fuller Focus, Spring 12.

This is a report of the Kuyper lecture held at Fuller Theological Seminary October 31 1996. (see No.275). The article is framed with a photo of a Skillen-Mouw moment sharing a joke. Every creature is magnificent, each in its own way, he explains. And this is a brief summary of the gist of Cal DeWitt's lecture. The biblical idea of economy, DeWitt explains, appealing to Genesis 2:15, is that of serving and keeping creation, not oppressive domination. That is why Christians ought to see themselves as modern-day Noahs, working, for example, to save endangered species... A campaign to save endangered species, therefore, represents a call to human self- limitation.


The important fact about the entry on citizenship is its succinct coherent summary of political history similar to the view presented by Herman Dooyeweerd in the early chapter of Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options (1979). The same perspective has been further developed in the analysis of America’s role among the nations (With or Against the World
(2005) No.347). The Voting entry begins with a recognition that there are not only different systems of balloting in different polities but there are different forms of voting in different societal structures. The discussion is limited to voting in political elections.


See also “Christian Faith and Public Policy - a Reformed Perspective” No.297. This is an exposition of political responsibility in terms of the gospel and derives principles for Christian political action. Only Jesus Christ is sovereign on earth as well as in heaven. Human beings are called to live by faith and any imposition of one faith on people is actually to violate their God-given religiosity. This is another way of discussing Christ’s patience as a corner-stone of a Christian political perspective. Structural and confessional pluralism are outlined and the term public justice is defined. It is interesting that in this piece Skillen explicitly affirms that public justice is incompatible with any subsidiary and undifferentiated sphere in which omnicompetent authority is assumed. The order imposed by a political system is discussed as are individual rights and the way justice confronts race and racism. A political order in which majority rule excludes minority expression is ruled out. Skillen provides a brief explanation of the American political system and how “principled pluralism” seeks to address the problems that are raised within that polity.


This is a proposal to investigate State implementation of the “Charitable Choice" provision (Section 104) of the 1996 federal welfare law. A two-track method is proposed: evaluating how state governments implemented the Charitable Choice requirement through revised laws and programs; investigating responses of faith communities to the changing state policies and thereby determine whether the new laws facilitate greater service in the public-square by faith-based organizations. The research will document progress and identify obstacles that still need to be overcome.


Capital Commentary Sept 1, 1997. This is a discussion about justice in education in the midst of great poverty that is manifest in the nation’s school system. Support for school choice among African- Americans had risen from 61% to 86.5% in a year and politicians like Dan Coats (see Kuyper lecture No.285) were admitting their concern had shifted to poor and minority families. In a light but firm way this broadsheet notes that poverty and education are linked and reform must respect parental choice. Let’s do justice to the poor and minorities by establishing a system that offers fair and equal educational choice for everyone. Publicly supported, fair and equal choice of schools for all students is no soft option.

1998


Skillen’s advocacy of a comprehensive political perspective means he is aware of the gaps in the work of the Center for Public Justice. There has been some publications on land use and farming (No.81, No.82, No.201) and also on the environment (No.148, No.266). The more recent work explains why it is important that it be kept on Skillen’s research agenda. Part of this involves the
comprehensive dimension of systematic political theory which indicates that sooner or later there are serious repercussions if tracts of life, let alone tracts of land, are left outside the purview of political stewardship. The final paragraph anticipates further CPJ reflection, public-policy research and civic education, to encourage both government and citizens to do greater justice to the environment. DeWitt also makes a contribution that reminds Christian readers of the importance of expounding the scriptures to hear God’s solemn declaration about His good creation. Looking at the world from this point of view, says DeWitt, we will be able to understand God’s message to Job about Behemoth - the huge, unsightly hippopotamus. God loves this creature, and even though humans might not find it worthy of preservation, God says, “Keep your hands off my hippo!”

276. “Justice and Civil Society” Civil Society Project, Harrisburg PA.

A brief education essay about justice, how it comes to expression in different structures (equal scoops of ice-cream for all but glasses only for those who need them) and how those legitimate non-government structures function in an integrated public-legal order in which government upholds justice. The public legal application of the concept to family law is described and, in the process, Skillen sketches the outline of a normative framework in which the sometimes contentious demands of individuals and lobbies in relation to marriage and family-related matters can be evaluated. Schooling is also discussed, in particular the question of public funding and why it should be for all schools as a matter of justice. The question of government over- reaching its legitimate authority by claiming “principalship” for schools (in whole or in part) is also discussed.


The case Monsma argues in this book is described as a correct one. It advances the cause of justice to non-government organisations that are explicit about their religious basis. Monsma, a university professor, had served as an elected representative to the Michigan House and Senate for a couple of terms.

This book pushes further the view developed in Monsma’s Positive Neutrality (No.263, see also No.36) explaining why religious non-profits and schools in receipt of Government funds “are in a legally unprotected, vulnerable situation.” Skillen’s view is that Monsma’s most important insight is that religion cannot be pushed into a corner.


A succinct 5-6 page explanation of the “principled pluralist” political outlook. Structural pluralism is outlined. Political constitutions, in identifying the limits of governmental authority, implicitly recognise the differentiated social authorities that lie beyond the legitimate sphere of government in the political community.

This differentiated authority cannot be accounted for by reducing it to the social constructions of allegedly free and autonomous individuals, nor is it a single collectivity. These are structures, the norms for which are discovered by human involvement within these relationships.

Confessional pluralism is enshrined in the US constitution’s first amendment by which government is obligated to protect the religious freedom of its citizens. Government should not arrogate to itself the right to define as non-religious things that are outside churches and synagogues. In fact, people’s religions should not be identified only with their ecclesiastical practices and affiliations.

See No.357 (2006). This is a document that has gone through various editions since its initial formulation in a two-part series in Public Justice Report in 1998. What is the Center for Public Justice? Why does it exist? What does it do? How does it differ from the Christian Coalition or a church lobby organization or a think tank? This essay seeks to explain the Center’s identity, its commitment to principled pluralism, its comprehensive approach, its international perspective. The most recent version reads as follows: “The Center for Public Justice approaches government and citizenship from a wide-ranging, comprehensive perspective. The Center seeks to do justice from a Christian-democratic perspective by recognizing different religions and points of view and keeping the public square open to people of all or no faiths. The Center believes government’s authority is not limitless and that it should respect the responsibilities and rights of individuals and organizations. We seek to act with a comprehensive, constitutional concern for political life in all of its dimensions—domestic as well as international” (March 30, 2006). The dissemination of the 1998 essay coincided with “Basic Affirmations of the Center for Public Justice” distributed in May-June 1996 which affirmed principles basic to a 7-part series that ran from March/April 1994 until November/December 1996.


This is another contribution to the CRCNA denominational magazine which attempts to explain the current (1998) controversy over educational vouchers. This contentious and ambiguous debate is sketched in outline. The “choice” and “competition” of Republicans is fiercely opposed by Democrats who fear the development of free market dominance in schooling, and further impoverishment of the poor and ethnic minorities. Hence they are strongly supportive of the view that more federal dollars should be channelled into public schools. Skillen argues that for parents to choose a religious school, which has already been accredited by the State authority as a school, does not establish religion.


This is an exposition of 1 Kings 17 in the context of the sabbatical theme by which God taught His people how to live a whole and healthy life. A drought had come as God’s punishment, in fulfillment of the promised curse of Leviticus 26:19-20 should they fail to keep God’s commandments. The widow of Zarephath, eating her last meal, believed the God of Israel, and God’s blessings were focused upon that small household - the widow, her son and Elijah. Her son’s illness made her wonder whether God had sent Elijah as a curse, but when the child was restored in answer to Elijah’s prayer, her trust was restored. Wealth and poverty are redefined here in terms of faith and unbelief. Our care for the needy today will not spring automatically from the fact of our material wealth. Most of us are rich enough to give away far more than we do now. No, our care will spring, if it springs at all, from our love for, and faith in, God.


In this May 1998 lecture, Skillen presents his vision of Christian politics in the 21st century. The headings from the original English version of the lecture are: Time for Creative Christian Thinking and Engagement. Korean Christians are busy in forming a new Christian vision of political responsibility that encompasses the entire globe. This transition moment in human history offers Christians a tremendous opportunity to pray and work together in new ways for new political understanding, for an understanding that will allow us to become more faithful.
witnesses in politics to the God who rules the world through Jesus Christ. Three Competing Visions. Western secularism now confronts revived Islam as well as Christianity. How will Christians respond to the fallout of this confrontation? Gaining a Christian Perspective in Politics. Such a perspective must be communal, publicly expressed, critical and related to the real political conditions of the lives of citizens.

What Should Characterize Christian Politics in the Next Century? 1. a comprehensive approach and focus; 2. a self-critical awareness that we work between Christ’s first and second coming; 3. a continual quest for justice to all our neighbors, image- bearers of God in their many callings; 4. a focus upon international justice; 5. aim to build up an international community of Christian political faith and action.


Skillen reviews the predominant views of 20th century and post World-War Two American political science to ascertain the dominant trends in political thinking about pluralism.

First he sets the frame of reference for his article by setting out his own view. A just political order adheres to two pluralist principles: the first is that the laws of the land should respect the societal diversity which is manifest by a wide range of human responsibilities and social institutions. This can only be truly maintained by an open, non-totalitarian and pluralist social order.

The second pluralism concerns the variety of faiths and philosophies by which people direct their public and private lives. The laws should do justice to these faiths and philosophies by equitable and non-discriminatory treatment in public, as well as in private spheres of life. The chapter also assumes that modern liberal beliefs are integral to the strict separationist argument that religion has no place in political life and as such if the US is to become a more just society it must disestablish this view that shapes society by means of a bipolar dichotomy of sacred and secular, nonsectarian and sectarian, rational neutral and religiously biased” (p.56).

The views of Thiemann (No.263), MacIntyre, Stout and Walzer (No.218), Rawls (No.348) and Berger and Neuhaus (No 216) are surveyed. The development of many streams of pluralistic thinking is outlined, in order to show its adherence to the religious assumptions on which the prevailing liberal paradigm is built, even when it promotes a more pluralist, less individualist and potentially more just view of religious equality in public life.


The review of Papini brings this important chronicle about the development of Christian Democrat International to the attention of Calvin Theological Journal readers. He concludes his book with reflections on the current crisis in Christian democratic thought and experience. Right after World War II, for example, Christian democrats spent more time debating moral, social, and political philosophy than they did economic and social policy. The consequence was the development of a pragmatic frame of mind of those concerned when their parties won control of government. Papini is clear that this poses a problem for the CD movement. It is not certain that the CD movement has a future in promoting a distinctive vision of democracy and international justice. In his book Perry does
not critically assess his own assumptions and thus his dogmatic view is that legislators should only listen to “religious arguments” if a persuasive “secular argument” also comes to the same conclusion. Secular = universal; religious = parochial/ provincial. Such a view can’t understand the reasoning that led to the First Amendment.


Skillen introduces Senator Dan Coats (R-Ind) who applauds economic prosperity and a more limited role of government ... is distressed by the moral crisis of the culture and particularly by the signs of a weakening "civil society" - the web of society’s nongovernment institutions. This was the third Kuyper lecture held on October 30th, 1997.

There is a paradox at the heart of Coats’s legislative agenda, his project for American renewal, two dozen proposals to encourage parents, church leaders, nonprofit service providers, and others to act on their moral and religious convictions. The question comes down to this: how should government promote healthy morals without acting in ways that discriminate against citizens who may disagree and hold other moral convictions.

Skillen, in introducing Glenn C Loury, Mary Nelson and Stanley W Carlson-Thies, provides a suggested path for a new view of public morality. Government in its own sphere, as well as families, schools, churches, businesses, and a wide variety of other social institutions, all have distinct responsibilities that together must be fulfilled to make possible the common good. Recognizing and seeking to strengthen this diverse range of human moral responsibilities offers a way out of the founders’ paradox ....

Christianity requires a critical reappraisal of all habits and ideologies. Mending fences should take place in the light of God’s revelation, which comes through the order of creation and in Christ’s recovery of the sinfully distorted creation by his redeeming grace.

1999.


This contribution to Bob Goudzwaard’s Festschrift discusses the writer’s friendship with the retiring professor and how the Dutch economist had contributed to his own theoretical work and that of the Center for Public Justice (No.8, No.10, No.40, No.51, No.102, No.244). The Center for Public Justice has not yet focused much attention on issues of political economy. The closest we have come is in our work on welfare reform and on the environmental stewardship of farm land. Consequently, our engagement with Bob’s work has most frequently been at the level of basic principles of economic justice. What follows are 18 theses to orient the theoretical, scholarly and public-policy research of North American Christians as we try to develop a distinctively Christian approach to political engagement in a country whose pragmatic, liberal, capitalist economy leads the world, but allows all too little room for critical reflection. These 18 theses outline the comprehensive rule of God over all He has made, the entire creation, of which nothing is "secular" in the sense of being outside religious responsibility for stewardship. Humans by their diligence are called to discover the norms of good stewardship and repent of wasteful economic ordering. Human stewardship is then elaborated in terms of the restoration and renewal of creation as workers in God’s Kingdom forsake all and
follow Jesus Christ the One who rules them and blesses them in their work. The 18 points emphasise the importance of a differentiated society, raise questions about economic justice - the juridical side of economic activity and the economic side of just public order governance. Government responsibility is elaborated, the importance of ongoing development of public policies emphasized, and economic well-being is defined and explained in relation to an open society with free markets justly regulated. A limited government will seek to justly and appropriately regulate non-government organizations. Economic justice has corrective and distributive aspects which must take account of international inter-dependence.


See No. 245 above.


An examination of comments made by a founder of the Moral Majority who had publicly conceded defeat in the culture wars. There is no moral majority, he says. Same old strategy, says Skillen in this ESA magazine. He now sounds retreat even from all the organisations which the popularist campaigning of the Moral Majority had brought into being. It is the win-everything/lose-everything politics of cultural majoritarianism, which leads Weyrich and others to oscillate between driving for dominance and fleeing for purity...Christians in particular should relinquish the civil- religious ideal of the United States as a mono-cultural, mono-moral “city on a hill” and help build a republic that gives equal treatment to all faiths and cultural commitments.


This Washington Update reports on research that links a declining crime rate (half of the decrease) with the high rate of abortion in the US since 1973. Skillen discusses the viewpoint and also notes the growth of pro-life counselling. Is not this and the non-profit services provided for pregnant mothers, part of the picture? It should spur serious reflection, he says. It will be wonderful if 20 years from now the statistics show that the rate of abortion continued to decline over all those years and that crime continued to go down. And won’t it be wonderful if the researchers can report that the number of pro-life counseling centers, Christian drug-rehabilitation programs, Muslim after-school programs and Jewish job-training programs have all grown to the point where they have become the primary reason for both fewer abortions and declining crime.


An earlier version of Chapter 5 of In Pursuit of Justice, No.341. The word “evangelical” in this chapter’s title, plus its use throughout the article, is worthy of careful examination. Usually the word christian is used, and Skillen does expound a biblically-directed view of social and political life that would be recognizably christian to an evangelical reader. This aspect of the chapter is no longer evident in the later version to be found in In Pursuit of Justice. Moreover, in the opening footnote p.203 Skillen locates himself in relation to the civil rights movement in the following terms: I was a student at Wheaton College (Illinois) from 1962 to 1966 where more attention was paid to the Vietnam War than to the climactic phases of the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, before the 1960s were out, black evangelicals like Tom Skinner (Black and Free [Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1968]) and William Pannell (My Friend the Enemy [Waco, Tex:
Word, 1968)) were becoming known in white evangelical circles. Evangelicals had no excuse for ignoring Salley and Behm’s Your God is too White and John Perkins’ A Quiet Revolution [Waco, Tex: Word, 1976], and in the 1970s there were more efforts to bring black and white evangelicals together in the cause of social justice. An example of the latter was the movement that produced The Chicago Declaration Ronald J Sider (ed) (Carol Stream, Ill: Creation House 1974). The first 5 pages 115- 120 give a 1999 retrospective on the civil rights movement. The initial sentence reads What was the American public’s understanding of the civil rights movement in the 1960s? On what terms did the majority, including Christians of various stripes, promote or at least acquiesce in the rejection of legal discrimination - legalized racism - against African Americans? What were their expectations of the consequences? It is noteworthy that in the later 2004 edition Skillen amends the question to read What was the American public’s understanding of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s? On page 120 the perspective is drawn since the 1970s. In the book version it takes that back another decade to the 1960s. Antidiscrimination and Societal Complexity (pp.120-122) is replaced in the 2004 version by a discussion of Just and Unjust Discrimination, and whereas the 1999 version has Rudiments of a Christian Public Worldview (pp.123-131) is “replaced” in the later work by a brief two page discussion of The Image of God. The next section of the article An Evangelical Christian contribution to Racial Justice (pp.131-135) is clearly part of the book’s purpose and why this contribution was solicited (or included). It is an argument that seeks to address the absence of a Christian public philosophy to the American evangelical way of life. Cooperation in the civil rights movement of the 1960s among black and white Christians and people of other persuasions contributed little toward the development of a Christian public philosophy sufficient for life in a religiously diverse and institutionally differentiated society. This could be a major evangelical contribution to American public life. Unfortunately, this aim does not occupy the attention of enough Christians. Most continue to approach politics as other citizens do, with a rather simplistic conservative or liberal bias oriented by an interest-group mentality rather than by a public-interest mentality. The article provides a Christian basis for ongoing government attention to the structural injustices that may still be evident in the society long after racism has been made illegal. Once citizens of color are not singled out for publicly enforced exclusion or negative discrimination because of their color, the manner and means of their inclusion must come about in ways that do justice to the responsibilities and standards appropriate to the institutions and relationships that are not racially or politically qualified. Skillen concludes with political admonition. Evangelical Christians need to repent of their racism and, among other things, recognize that even within their own ranks there are all kinds of people, red, yellow, black and white …. What is needed is a movement that can draw together people of all races and faiths for the cause of public justice in a pluralistic society, justice that begins with equal civil rights for all and continues with the just treatment of people in their diverse non-political roles - in the differentiated institutions and relationships free from government interference - without discriminatory treatment because of their faith.

2000

291 “Catholic House Chaplain” Capital Commentary March 27.

"The question then is this: Should government, even symbolically, enclose everyone or every representative in the country under one sacred roof?” In the “internal” conduct of a government’s proper business - as with the legislature, or with the armed forces - how should government ascribe due respect to religious diversity without violating the underlying principle involved in the separation of church and state. “The House and the Senate should appoint chaplains of different faiths to serve members and their staffs according to their diverse
faiths.” In this discussion the question of how the organs of Government pay due respect to how they publicly communicate their concern to ensure public justice, in relation to the “semiotics” of official representation is considered further below. See for example No.345 and No.411.


This sarcastic letter refers to a front page Washington Post (May 5 2000) article, "Bush Puts Faith in a Social Service Role - Church-Based Providers Freed From Many Rules”. It reads: “I am thankful for Hanna Rosin’s front-page report on faith at work in Texas (May 5). It was good that the article carefully avoided the mention of any successful faith-based social-service organization. It was also good that it did not mention the failures of any secular social-service providers. I’m also glad that Rosin avoided mentioning Al Gore’s support for expanding the role of faith-based organizations. Altogether the article assures me that George W Bush must be a religious nut and that Gore’s affirmation of support for such programs must have been a temporary lapse into rhetorical excess and political pandering. I also now feel confident that President Clinton’s signature on the 1996 welfare reform bill, which requires states to give equal treatment to faith-based providers, must have been just another of his indiscretions.” The letter may be viewed as excessively sarcastic but it does expose a bias in the journalism whereby anything to do with religion is viewed a priori as excessively and obsessively power-hungry.


This discussion is about the validity of “faith-based organisations” (FBOs) and how justice is served by the 1996 Charitable Choice provision in welfare legislation. FBOs are not the “solution” to poverty, and Charitable Choice was not simply about getting “more bang for the social service buck”. Skillen is concerned with the injustice in the establishment of welfare as a secular arena where government support for FBOs is ruled out allegedly by appeal to the First Amendment. Government should partner with all varieties of nongovernment service providers, including FBOs, and not establish those that promise to act in a secular and nonreligious way. The Charitable Choice provision removed the religious test to exclude FBOs.

There are two kinds of opponents - those who see government provision to NGOs as extensions of government, and those who believe that religious groups will lose their identity should they be in receipt of public funding. It is all about differing interpretations of the First Amendment. Skillen sees it as a protection of religious freedom. Government needs to rid itself of its acquired habit of religious discrimination. Just as Government can’t tell people how to view social welfare provision, so it should not inhibit the religious freedom of those who view their social welfare involvement a part of their religion.


(published with a booklet The Biblical Theme of Justice) This collection of 75 meditations, mainly from “The Testimony” of Public Justice Report, are organized thematically according to biblical teaching about justice. Skillen does not say that political theory is the necessary grid through which the bible should be interpreted. But he does strongly affirm his view that if we fail to understand that the Bible is also a political book then we are losing sight of its importance in our lives. To read the Bible and history aright, therefore, is to see and to hear the covenant Lord keeping his promises.

This Covenant to Keep drama does not occur as only one act or one scene in a larger play; it is the play, the entire production. Sun and moon, sand and sea,
plants and animals, angels and humans all find their place in a single drama. The whole cosmos, from origin to fulfillment, exists as the garden and the workshop, the temple and the city, of the Lord’s revelatory purposes.

The meditations are framed by essays:

Prologue: the Biblical Drama To read the Bible and history aright, therefore, is to see and to hear the covenant Lord keeping his promises;

Justice Required And one of the great mysteries about creation is that God’s exercise of justice will honor and fulfill, not abrogate, human responsibility to do justice;

Justice Restrained but as long as the Lord’s patience endures, there is opportunity for human beings to repent, to turn from their evil ways, and to recognize that life is sustained by God’s grace and mercy rather than by human ingenuity;

Justice Administered It has to do, for example, with how we deal with the poor and the needy, the stranger and the oppressed, the thief and the murderer;

Justice Assured Justice is assured because God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and Christ is the one who will judge the world with justice;

Justice Fulfilled This vision of all things reordered properly under God, under Christ’s feet, refers to the fulfillment of God’s original covenant with creation when humans were commissioned to bring to God everything that was placed under them (Hebrews 2:5-9);

A Final Reflection We are prophets of a future that is not our own (Oscar Romero).


This remarkable book assesses the philosophy of Eric Vögelin (1901-1985). The review makes mention of Vögelin’s critical point of departure from Max Weber to the post World War II exposition of how modern ideologies represent a revolt against the human condition, leading to the alienation of the soul because of its growing desire to escape from, or to transfigure, this world. For Vögelin the modern desire to “immanentize the eschaton” has Gnostic world-flight roots.

Skillen reiterates what he had noted elsewhere with respect to Vögelin’s view of Paul’s confidence about the resurrection (No.253, pp.93-4). Vögelin see this as a departure from authentic faith. For Vögelin there can be no bodily resurrection.


In the Foreword (pp.7-11), the reason for this 1998 Kuyper Lecture by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese with replies by Stanley J Grenz, Mardi Keyes and Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, is put simply by Skillen and Voll: the twentieth-century saw the revolutionary transformation of the status of women. Almost every aspect of life has changed for American women. A special CNN millennium compendium shows that in 1900 only eight hundred thousand wives were working compared to thirty-four million today. With increasing economic opportunities and pressures, more and more women and men now struggle to balance the often competing demands of work and family life. The Kuyper Lecturer for 1998 aimed to challenge mothers and fathers to rethink their responsibility for their children under Christ’s redeeming Lordship.
The Conclusion (pp.93-104) identifies three things upon which the participants agree: 1. the individualist, autonomy gospel is a dead-end; it does not lead to justice for anyone; 2. the family is no contract among autonomous individuals; 3. a Christian approach starts with women, men and children created in the image of God. Skillen and Voll raise the question of the legitimacy of the historical differentiation of women’s roles and responsibilities in all areas of God’s creation. Fox-Genovese has argued that the liberation of women from family service may have come at too great a cost to society and to Christian virtue. The respondents say she underestimates the negative features of a social order in which women are confined to the roles of wife and mother.

The discussion moves to “Four Necessary Commitments”:
1. The cultural mandate calls men and women to work together as God’s image bearer;
2. Meaning in life is not confined to roles determined by one’s gender;
3. There are responsibilities like children’s responsibilities to parents that cannot be avoided. Likewise with the decision to enter into marriage. Marriage means accepting all the obligations of marriage and mutual service to each other. Fox-Genovese calls on Christians to accept the bond-servant status of these circles;
4. This commitment concerns civil rights and discusses how the public legal sphere meets the marriage/family sphere.

Fox-Genovese, Mary Ann Glendon, and others are correct to warn us about the dangers of an individualist mode of legal and political reasoning that, even now, is threatening to dismember families into mere collections of individuals, to set children over against their spouses, and to set spouses against one another in ways that weaken parental, spousal and other social responsibilities. The Conclusion then raises some “Public Policy Concerns”, emphasizing that government policy should strengthen rather displace or weaken the spousal, parental, and occupational responsibilities that belong to people who are always more than citizens.


The subtitle is “A Reformed Perspective” and it begins with an exposition of John 15:5 The Vine and the Branches “without me you can do nothing”. This is the biblical basis for the teaching about God’s sovereignty over all of creation; of creation as the domain of the Son’s rule; and of human responsibility as a created office given by God and set by Him in the order of creation. The biblical teaching of Meeting Together is not just about cultic observances; it is to do with our wide-as-life tasks as disciples. The two forms of pluralism are expounded and then applied to what racial justice, environmental justice and the just use of force would mean in a polity ruled by public justice.


A comment on the increase of “God-talk” in the Gore v Bush presidential race. Should government, even symbolically, enclose everyone or every representative in the country under one sacred roof? Or, instead, should it require all religious expressions to remain outside the “secular” public square? Or, as a third option, should it make room for all faiths - both religious and secular - without giving a privileged position to any of them? The last option is the only just one in a republic that calls for justice for all. Genuine pluralism is the just way.


This is a comment on the policy statements of Bush and Gore in the lead up to the 2000 presidential election. The new president and congress can avoid imposing some Pharaohesque command only if they enact some combination of reforms that will: 1) reduce benefits for those retirees who are better off while
easing the burden on the poorest workers, and 2) increase the age at which people can begin to draw their Social Security benefits. The article concludes Let’s keep making bricks, but let’s require that the Egyptians (ie the Social Security system) help, perhaps by asking their able-bodied well-to-do retirees to help gather the straw.


Skillen’s September 28, 2000 Kuyper lecture places the American republic within a cauldron of dissension about the origin, limits and responsibility of political authority in an era of dynamic social innovation and diversification. But, says Skillen, politics is about God’s calling of government and citizens into service. Despite the positive benefits of written constitutions, the Bill of Rights, disestablishment of religion, juridical review, separation of powers and its federal structure, two dominant political traditions have thwarted the development of authentic statecrafting as a task for the entire citizenry.

The first tradition sees politics as a function of “unalienable rights” of individuals. There is no direct authority of God over government. The other voice, the other dominant tradition, has a distinctly Christian evangelical sound to it, which can be presumed to be close to the view of groups like the Christian Government Movement (No.13), and other groups classified as “Pro-American Conservatives” in The Scattered Voice (No.192). But when it is examined closely it too has no state to craft, only evils to be punished and a potentially oppressive government to be restrained. There are temporal, secular interests to satisfy and religious freedoms to protect. These two traditions came together to reinforce one another in the shaping of American politics. And the lecture continues to outline a direction by which people can be trained in an alternative statecraft, who are able to meet this civil religious dominance in a way that is refreshingly principled.

After expounding The Individual Rights Tradition, Skillen turns to The Tradition of Government Outside the Perfection of Christ which leaves the State in limbo because of its Government-on-account-of-sin dogmatism. The views of Reinhold Niebuhr (Moral Man and Immoral Society 1932) and Richard Hays (The Moral Vision of the New Testament 1996 - see also essay with Keith Pavlishchek on Hays’ pacifism No.310) are canvassed. In Finding Grounds for Statecraft, Skillen returns to scriptural teaching in order to rework and refashion a rationale for positive Christian statecraft - a stewardship which reveals something about God and ourselves as His image bearers - political life reveals and anticipates and here Skillen brings together in one narrative the biblical exposition he had been working on all along (No.245, No.251, No.278, No.287). Statecraft Fit for Reality concedes the fears of fellow citizens will have about “Christian politics”, in all of its historical forms. The same theme of Christ’s gracious, patient rule requires equal treatment of everyone in the political field of this world is reiterated. The lecture then proceeds to expound: 1. Christ’s Kingship and the American republic; 2. Statecraft and the Plural Structure of Society; 3. The Shrinking Globe.

In Conclusion Skillen explains the true basis of the American republic and any other state. Political community expresses one dimension of our identity as the image of God and both reveals something true about, and anticipates the coming fulfillment of, the City of God under the reign of Jesus Christ... The most urgent need of American politics and government today is to discover the true basis of, and genuine inspiration for, statecraft. For every political community and government on earth stands under the judgment as well as the promises of the One who at present upholds them all and who holds each one directly accountable.

Skillen is apportioned the task of writing the Conclusion to this symposium. Kuyper’s allegiance to Christ and biblical authority was the basis for his social vision with his famous phrase of “sphere sovereignty”. The conclusion is rounded out with a discussion of Christianity’s role in the shrinking globe. Kuyper advocated a biblically-based spirituality that leads to a refreshing ecumenical perspective.


This is a further development of Skillen’s appraisal of Daniel Elazar found in No.308. This is not a fully developed review essay of Daniel Elazar’s four volumes, but a piece written “in appreciation” for a life-time’s scholarship that has highlighted The Covenant Tradition in Politics. Skillen raises some questions about the significance of this work, its finer details and subsequent possible applications. He is aware of its fruitfulness in highlighting the importance of the biblical tradition for western political understanding (see for example the entry under “Citizenship” in No.271). The first set of questions derive from Elazar’s distinction between a (divinely initiated) covenant and a (human) compact.

The second set of critical observations and extensions has to do with the way federalism is conceptualised. How should Swiss and American federal constitutions be understood in covenantal terms. They are part of a covenant tradition but is that all that can be said about them? How does continuity and discontinuity in the covenantal tradition come about? How is it to be maintained and developed? With the rise of contractual individualism in America does it make sense to talk about covenantalism in American and global public life?

The third set of observations, headed Social Justice, arise from Elazar’s view that rights derive from covenantal obligations. For Elazar, political federalism and societal pluralism are often interchangeable terms for the same thing. Can covenant exist without a transcendent grounding? What is the relation between the political covenants of federalism, republicanism and constitutionalism and non-political associations? How should they be distinguished?

If covenant practise is normative for political life, how is individualism (the opposite of covenantal associationalism) to be confronted and (possibly) changed? As long as the US keeps its federal political structure, can it survive the secularizing, individualistic reduction of its social order? Are secular compacts sufficient to sustain a once “covenanted” people?


This CTJ review strongly commends a work about the US constitution’s First Amendment. The first page of the 2+ page review describes the prevailing political and legal viewpoint, buttressed by popular sentiment, that makes the American story into one with exceptional, almost cosmic, consequences.

It is a modern Enlightenment story and is freighted with prejudice. Skillen then identifies 7 commendable amendments, corrections, augmentations that Witte’s book makes to the prevailing story. 1. He explains that constitutional rights and religious liberty originated in the church of the late Roman Empire, and predated America by 1200 years. Moreover Dutch constitutionalism was the first model of how constitutional government safeguards religious liberty; 2. the book identifies 6 elements that are part of the founding American definition of religious
freedom: i. liberty of conscience; ii. free exercise of religion; iii. development of religious pluralism; iv. Emphasis upon religious equality; v. separation of church and state; vi. disestablishment of religion; 3. reminds readers of at least 4 distinct religious groups that had input into the First Amendment formulation - puritans, evangelicals, enlightenment enthusiasts, civic republicans; 4. describes how states dealt with religious freedom before 1947 when the Supreme Court began to trump state laws and rulings; 5. the presentation has an international focus; 6. the technical apparatus and appendices list the different drafts of the religion clauses 1787-1789; State constitutional provisions; US Supreme Court decisions 1815-1997. The review as a commendation of constitutional legal scholarship is a reminder that advocating political reforms requires painstaking juridical scholarship. There are no short cuts where this kind of political-legal research work is concerned.


This succinct exposition of Skillen’s political perspective, addresses the two aspects of principled pluralism - structural pluralism and confessional pluralism. It explores the relationship of democracy to Christian discipleship, how the effectiveness of Christ’s rule in the present age is to be measured. The policy consequences of a Christian pluralist view are outlined in relation to welfare, family and educational law. Christians should be confessional “monists”, grounded in the affirmation that government’s responsibility, under Christ, is to act as a humble servant of justice. Confessional pluralism under government is a true consequence, a principled outcome of the Christian confession that Jesus Christ alone is Lord. In conclusion Skillen notes: We have a long way to go to work out in political life the implications of the truth that all things were created in and for the Son of God, in whom all things hold together. Not until we understand truly the supremacy of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, will we understand the true meaning of political and civic responsibility.


In certain respects this review of Martin E Marty should be read against the background of No.80 Disestablishment a Second Time. Back in 1982 when that book was published, Martin Marty wrote the Foreword. “This Foreword has implied some minor disagreements. It is not a “blurb” by a fawning admirer… Until and unless we can restore some of that more neutral sense to public education we will find that the public forum as such will disappear completely. America will be left with self-enclosed, solipsistic, mutually exclusive tribes.”

Now with this review on Marty’s on www.beliefnet.com website, Skillen has “carried the dialogue” further, and in fact does so by directly answering Marty’s critical observations this time, building on his discussion of changing assumptions in the public governance of education (No.134), the “friend of the court” appeal in 1987 (No.137), the closer examination of Thomas Jefferson’s religiosity which Marty had referred to in the earlier Foreword (No.142), a sociological critique of Government principalship in education (No.168), and a more systematic discussion of education policy (No.189).

Skillen begins his review of these two jointly written books in this way: Martin E Marty, America’s most famous and most prolific church historian, wants to start a conversation about religion and American society. For the previous 5 years Marty had directed the Public Religion Project. According to Skillen, Marty’s underlying motive is to try to find a way to hold America together … Diverse and
contradictory views can still add up to unity as long as Americans continue to converse about their differences.

In effect Marty desperately wants to retain an American civil religion, even if it consists of nothing more than an agreement that all opinions may be expressed and that the majority will not disagree too strongly with the author... There is little substance in Marty’s concept of the “common good” - keeping all differences in play by conversation is a rather thin basis for any conversation...

This line of critique has been developed already in Skillen’s review of Stephen Carter (No.233), Ronald Thiemann (No.263, No.283) and Jim Wallis (No.246, No.262).

2001


A contribution to the Wall Street Journal. Ashcroft promotes the kind of Christian politics Skillen has identified with the “second major trend”, the “tradition of Government outside the perfection of Christ”. That way of viewing politics has no recognition of the political community as a creationally grounded human potential, of God-given norms or standards for the positive, obedient development of Statecraft. From this critical vantage point Skillen argues, effectively, that office-bearers in American government can just as validly come from this tradition as they can from the (so-called) “liberal rights tradition”. Drawing on his article on Jefferson, and the quote from Jefferson to his nephew Peter Carr (No.142), Skillen shows that Jefferson’s modern-day spiritual heirs, perhaps unlike Jefferson himself, condemn public officials like Ashcroft because his profession of faith transcends the pragmatic usefulness they will concede to religion when it inspires public virtue. But Skillen not only notes that Ashcroft confesses that God is superior to the American republic, he has shown that the American republic has always tried to make room for people who do believe that that is true.


In his Introduction Skillen identifies the fact that the issue of globalization is here to stay and that the village of humanity, however, is more and more characterized by extremes of wealth and poverty, of optimism and hopelessness ... Further on he explains why globalization should not surprise Christians - the good news, as message of redemption, restoration and reconciliation calls for a confrontation with poverty and degradation.

Goudzwaard sees people hypnotized by acquisitiveness and competition, fearful of falling behind or not getting ahead fast enough, acting like children who believe there is no other way to “make progress”, even though poverty and environmental degradation grow worse rather than better. Like prophets of old, Goudzwaard calls for the fearful to wake up, to shake off their hypnosis in order to become “mature, realistic and open-faced” human beings once again. The Introduction is just over 4 pages in length, while the Conclusion of 17 pages is in fact a significant contribution.

In response to Brian Fikkert’s critical observations, Skillen wonders whether it might not be better to argue that conversion is needed at the “religiously-deep level”, maturation at the level of culture, and waking up as the required response that is needed at the level of everyday experience where people are buying, selling, working, consuming and investing?
A genuine renewal of global action for justice will coincide with a change in the way we understand self-care and self-regard. Skillen notes that the positive (5-step) admonition set forth by Goudzwaard is an attempt to identify some basic economic principles for application at all levels in any person's view of reality. Promoting the public good in our rapidly differentiating and shrinking world [requires] learning how to answer the question, Who (which person or institution) bears what kind of responsibility to do what, and how should each one exercise that responsibility in obedient response to God for everyone’s good, including the good of our neighbours who stand in the greatest need? (p.113).


This essay is a slightly expanded version of the previous article (No.302), and is written as an appreciation for Elazar's work (he had died in 1999). It is also part of Skillen’s attempt to take note of another scholar who, like himself, had contributed to the rebirth of Althusius scholarship after Carl J Friedrich and Frederick S Carney. In certain respects Skillen’s critical observations are those of one who is trying to see how Althusius the Calvinist political theorist is viewed by Elazar the Jewish scholar of federalism. But it does not stop there. It is also an attempt by a Christian political theorist, who had published A Covenant to Keep (No.294), to develop respectful understanding of a contributor to distinctively Jewish /Hebraic political reflection.

The new conclusion affirms Skillen’s view that Elazar, though raising more questions than he has actually answered about the biblical foundations for thinking about modern politics, nevertheless has introduced the subject of covenant and its historical influence in a way that no one else has done.

In recent decades, the only works of equivalent weight that come to mind ... are Eric Vögelin’s Israel and Revelation (1958) ... ; Oliver O'Donovan’s The Desire of the Nations (1996); and two or three books by reconstructionists such as R J Rushdoony and Greg Bahnsen. Yet none of these has connected the covenant idea with the emergence of modern federalism and constitutionalism in the way Elazar has done. The review is concluded in a manner that reckons with the importance of cultivating political science traditions as part of the Christian scholarly task.

309. with Jerry S Herbert and Joshua Good At the Political Crossroads: Christian Civic Education and the Future of the American Polity a report for the Saints and Citizens Project Center for Public Justice. (Introduction & Conclusion)

With a grant from Pew Charitable Trusts, CPJ and the Center for Christian Studies at Gordon College have initiated a study of the character and quality of Christian civic education in the United States at the turn of the century. This 175 pp research report documents a careful study of a representative sample of Christian organizations that are active in civic affairs, orienting the study around in-depth personal interviews with leaders of the selected organizations (p.1). The purpose of the report is itself educative, alerting a wider public about the aims, purposes and practices of the organizations studied. The organisations studied include schools (Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of Seattle and the Association of Christian Schools International), churches (United Methodist Church: General Board of Church and Society; Mennonite Central Committee: The Washington Office; The Southern Baptist Convention: The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission; Roman Catholic Church: Faithful Citizenship); lobby organizations (Bread for the World; Network); thinktanks (The Acton Institute; Interdenominational Theological Center/ Faith Factor); mobilizing
campaigns (The Christian Coalition; Call to Renewal); professional/service organizations (Focus on the Family; Christian Legal Society); community development organizations (Allen A M E Church and Affiliates; The Ten-Point Coalition; Industrial Areas Foundation; Nueva Esperanza).

In conclusion, the report draws attention to the tendency of American Christians to engage in practical problem solving while giving relatively little thought to the strengths and weaknesses of the political system in which the problems arise. Structural questions were largely absent from the conversations held with the leaders of the organizations studied. Generally speaking political problems are not addressed in terms of the structural demands of justice, or the distinguishable responsibilities that belong to citizenship in contrast to other arenas of moral responsibility. The Catholic “system” has great potential for Christian civic education even though many Catholics know little or nothing about Catholic social teaching. The research also confronted very little criticism of public education.


This careful, jointly-written study about the biblical exegesis of Richard Hays, disagrees with the ultra-pacifist claim that the offices of government are off-limits to Christians. That view is derived from the Anabaptist Schleitheim Confession of 1525 that Government is “outside the perfection of Christ”. It is a systematic exposition of the pacifist interpretation of the Richard B Hays, colleague of Stanley Hauerwas and New Testament scholar. It focuses upon The Moral Vision of the New Testament (1996). Skillen would present his critical views of Hays in Chapter 9 of With or Against the World (No.347) and also refer to his pacifism in his Kuyper Lecture for 2000 (No.300). The purpose is given in these terms: In this essay we inquire into whether Hays’s attempt to provide exegetical support for the Hauerwasian position is persuasive. Our focus will be upon his chapter entitled “Violence in Defense of Justice” in The Moral Vision of the New Testament (chapter 14, pages 117-146). We will argue that Hay’s hermeneutical framework and his biblical exegesis are deeply flawed, and that if his viewpoint is adopted it will have a profoundly negative influence on Christian political thought, engagement and statecraft. Hays has identified “violence” as the major sin or temptation that Christians are called upon to avoid. The key text of his exegesis is Matthew 5:38-48 and from this he concludes that Jesus and the New Testament call upon Christians to avoid violence in every respect. There is equivocation in the way Hays uses the term “violence”. He asks in the first paragraph whether it is ever appropriate for followers of Jesus “to take up lethal weapons against enemies”? ... But then, he rephrases the question in the next sentence by asking, “Is it ever God's will for Christians to employ violence in defense of justice?” The question is prejudicial, because the term “violence” typically indicates an illegitimate imposition of force that does harm and injury to another. By definition, “violence” means or implies an act of injustice. How could God call Christians to commit unjust acts in defense of justice? The answer to Hays’s implicit question is obvious (p.425).

The article is a clear and systematic repudiation of Hays’s view of government as something beyond the limits of Christian involvement. The contrary argument is put: an official military, police and judicial system is indeed a God-ordained institution; the use of force to uphold justice, administered impartially, is a gift of God’s grace for protecting and restoring; Christians may serve in all arms of government. The section Soldiers in the New Testament raises questions about Hays’s proscription of military duties for Christians. In discussion of Hays’s Interpretation of the Key Text: Is the Church a Polis? the authors explain why it is misleading to use the polis-metaphor in way he does. Then, Hays on Romans 12-13, concludes the discussion and relates Hays’s argument to the Schleitheim
Articles of 1527 which views the sword as ordained by God “outside the perfection of Christ.” The argument taken to its logical implication puts the Father and incarnate Son in direct conflict.


This is a republication of an excerpt from No.211, 6-11.


This is a republication of an excerpt from No.211, 11-18.


This address was delivered at the International Symposium “Cultures and Christianity AD 2000” 21-25 August 2000, Hoeven, The Netherlands. The responses were also published: “Is Democracy the Ideal Universal Political System?” Yusufu Turaki, Nigeria and “Response” by Jeong-Kii Min, Korea.

The article begins with a discussion of rights, and how rights emerged in the context of many struggles for the differentiated freedom of science, education and commerce which had begun within the context of the church and the feudal system. What should characterize healthy differentiation? Skillen asks, and how should that come about in a non-Western context? Of great importance is the differentiation of the state from other institutions. If this is recognized now around the world, is Fukuyama right to suggest that the liberal state represents the “end of history”? The discussion continues with Christianity and the Enlightenment explaining how the conjunction of Christianity and the Enlightenment set the stage not so much for progress beyond the authoritarianism of Christianity but for the victory of various streams of Enlightenment authoritarianism.

Advocating a just State argues for a socially differentiated, constitutionally delimited, rule-of-law state - Democracy and Political Order outlines the problem of the accountability of government to the people ruled; how is just governance to be formed in a differentiating society? International Politics discusses the EC, the views of Robert Kaplan (in which multinationals and a few dominant states controlling the globe in their own interests), Martin van Creveld (who sees a decline in the state, the crowning glory of the West), Michael Sandel (No.186) and Michael Walzer (No.283) who are both anxious about the possibilities of a centralised international system - Sandel wanting dispersal of sovereignty and Walzer seeking something looser and more pluralistic than a global federation. The Conclusion affirms the universal legitimacy of representation of the people in the affairs of government and the protection of basic human rights. A constitutionally delimited state is a normative precondition for just governance and human flourishing within the political communities we have come to know as nation states, but it will also have its just corollary in the way the international order is governed.


Summary given by “Current Thoughts and Trends” on the Navigator Press website

There is a debate about President George W Bush’s support for charitable choice. What lies behind this? In answer to the question he sets, Skillen describes in brief the development of the three orders of pluralism in American social welfare history. At first it meant a pluralist republic according to the constitution’s First Amendment in which religion was neither established nor excluded; free exercise was not prevented. Then the States followed suit leading
to a second order of religious pluralism in the 1830s and 1840s in which Roman Catholicism was defined as sectarian and thereby classed as ineligible to receive public monies for their “sectarian” schools. The third form appeared in the late 19th century and represents a shift in the meaning of sectarian and non-sectarian. Now nonsectarian means secular and sectarian means religious.

A fourth form of religious pluralism is called for to establish pluralism in public and private sectors. The First Amendment does not prohibit the government cooperating with any body in providing for the common good. All religious groups and non-confessional groups should be able to qualify should government decide to fund worthy projects to promote the common welfare.


This is a statement which pulls no punches with respect to the notorious comments by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson on CBN’s 700 Club September 13, 2001 (subsequently retracted by the two mass-media dominant evangelists and re-printed on pages 126-7. There are three errors in the comments according to Skillen. The first is the presumption that they know the secret will of God. The second error is to confuse America with God’s chosen people and the third is the sin of self-righteousness. Christians should be spending their time ministering to the suffering and conveying the good news of God’s forgiving love in Jesus Christ, who is fashioning a new people drawn from all nations on earth. And in their civic capacities, Christians should be helping to design and support the public policies to protect the innocent and to punish those who take vengeance into their own hands.

https://commons.ptsem.edu/id/princetonseminar2232prin-dmd007

Skillen’s “Kuyper Prize” for 2001 in which his lecture was titled “A Kuyperian Moment for the Church in God’s World” can be found here:
https://commons.ptsem.edu/id/06760#audio-player-container

See also No.477 below.

In the Acknowledgements to In Pursuit of Justice (2004) (No.341) this is wrongly noted as 22.2). The article can be found in the Digital Textual Collections of Princeton Theological Seminary http://scdc.library.ptsem.edu/mets/. This lecture was delivered in the Main Lounge of the Mackay Campus Center on April 11, 2001 when Skillen was awarded the annual Princeton Seminary “Abraham Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life”. The published lecture was edited and became chapter 4 of In Pursuit of Justice. In this format its introductory two and a half pages sets discussion of Charitable Choice provision in the 1996 welfare-reform law in a 2000 year historical context. Considered from one perspective, the history of modern politics has been the struggle to overcome Christian imperialism, intolerance, and discrimination. The reformation and early nationalism combined with other movements to challenge the claims of the Holy Roman Empire from within Christendom itself. Then, as sovereign states took shape, the question of inclusiveness and exclusivity - of tolerance and intolerance - intensified. Could a unified state be maintained without a common faith or an established church, and if so, how? If Christian faith is no longer a qualification for full citizenship, then what glue will hold society together? One thing becomes clear here: Skillen, in addressing his Princeton audience, is aware of their ability to critically evaluate arguments not only in terms of their adherence to biblical teaching, but also in terms of whether they are framed in ways that can address people engaged in public life - Christian and non-Christian alike. Skillen’s argument - most pertinent to those enmeshed in post-
modern incredulity - assumes that the Enlightenment effort to overcome Christian imperialism, intolerance, and discrimination, has run its course and is now at a stage where it is confronted with its own form of humanist imperialism, intolerance, and discrimination which were only ever tenable as long as its own religiosity was denied. Skillen appeals to Christians who bear witness to the God whose rain and sunshine fall on the just and the unjust alike and confess that none but God may separate the wheat and the tares in the field of the divine kingdom. A basis has been established in God’s word for renouncing the mistaken identification of a political community with a community of Christian faith at the same time that secular humanism begins to understand its own imperialist drive and civil religious movements re-emerge to hold national communities together in "shared value systems". The final section of the lecture (IV Why a Kuyperian Moment?, 304-305) brings together the argument of the previous three sections. Kuyper had an “all of life” view of Christian discipleship; ... Kuyper, the Calvinist, challenged the imperial tradition that Christians, including Calvin, had absorbed and accepted for centuries, rejecting religious accommodation and embracing public pluralism; Kuyper had a pluralist vision of the Government service, its maintenance of public justice for all non-government institutions and relationships. Skillen having discussed three orders of pluralism (I Public Consciousness of Faith-Based Organizations, 287-294) and the rise of a secular establishment (II Challenges to the “Secular” Public, 294-296) he had also expounded his belief that a “fourth order of pluralism” which in recent decades had begun to emerge in American public life (III. A New Pluralism, 196-304) that gives context to the Charitable Choice provision.


The Editor’s response to the 9/11 terrorist attack. This 4th quarter edition of CPJ’s magazine consider the political character of the immediate aftermath. How is such a terrorist attack to be properly understood? “The judgements began to pour forth almost immediately - in contradictory abundance. This is war and terrorists deserve no mercy. No, the U.S. should restrain itself and not retaliate with force because that will only perpetuate violence. Islam is to blame. No, American arrogance is the deeper cause.” Patience and seriousness from readers is invoked by the writer.

2002


This has as its sub-heading: “Some would like to forget that Christmas - and religion in general - has political significance.” Immediately we are reminded of the political significance of the bible. Jesus was, after all, announced and received by His followers as the Messiah, the Christ, the King of the Jews. His life was so freighted with political significance that Herod tried to have Him killed in infancy. And regional authorities finally had him killed because they believed He was a threat to the establishment. Skillen continues with reference to modernist “toleration” that wants to exclude all religion from politics, and Freud added to the smug secularized dogma that religion can be put to one side by referring to religion as the future of an illusion. But today talk about non-religious politics is the illusion we should be thinking about. Once again an appeal for a “quiet and patient push for justice” (No.182).


This dictionary entry summarises the global situation with respect to religion and politics for the early decades of the 21st century. In the west a secular or non-sectarian rationality purportedly common to everyone prevailed, but increasingly
people of all and no faiths are considering whether public life is sustainable without some religious “glue”. How can religious pluralism be made compatible with social and political unity? On the one hand Islam is on the rise; Catholics around the world are marshalling a new generation that opposes secularism and relativism as they enter the political arena. On the other hand Enlightenment universalism is uncertain, and maybe in retreat when it is criticised as just another parochial outlook. The US has its “culture wars” focusing upon abortion, which exhibits a deep crisis in American civil religion. And yet most Western Christians do not have a viable political perspective. The 2nd half of the entry discusses: 1. how various forms of religious exceptionalism dominate politics in different ways around the globe. The various religious views held by people that they are special - whether before God, or by the finger of fate, or made so by history - must be a part of the contribution made to resolve political struggle; 2. how different religions view the question of political universalism, and how they consider the policies that believers are convinced are just for all; 3. how the different religions view themselves, as antithetically opposed to movements, trends, policies, because of the spiritual demands of their way of life.

This is a republication of an excerpt from No.211, 18-24.


This three page review considers that the book has three remarkable features. The review is then balanced with three critical reservations. 1. Bolt’s book is trans-Atlantic in character and focus. Kuyper is analysed in terms of leading thinkers on both sides of the ocean; 2. Building on the work of Bratt and heslam, Bolt considers Kuyper’s engagement and influence in the US building on the work of Bratt and Heslam; 3. Bolt views Kuyper as a poet in the line of Holland’s Calvinist poets. In criticism: 1. Bolt’s poetic interpretation of Kuyper is alright as far as it goes but it leaves too much room for the view that he was a romantic nationalist and advocate of civil religion (in his poetry and rhetoric). Bolt does not clearly show how Kuyper supported a progressive call for pluralism rather than a Christian nationalism, which difference was at the heart of the ARP/CHU political split. The split is simply not addressed; 2. Bolt assumes that Kuyper’s heritage is to be appropriated in the realm of “public theology” and hence misses Kuyper’s view of the church as the people of God in active obedience in all areas of social life; 3. For Kuyper’s contribution to be dubbed “theology”, even “public/political theology” is to miss important aspects of his contribution to the reformation of the scientific encyclopedia.

322. “What Does it Mean to be a Christian Citizen?” Seed of Scholarship (Gordon College) Fall, 2-3

This is a brief report for the Seeds of Scholarship magazine at Gordon College of the joint project Saints and Sinners Project undertaken with Pew Charitable trust money to investigate civic education. It gives background to the study At a Political Crossroads (No.309). It began as an effort by Skillen and Heie to explore Christian civic education.

Now, after all of that, Harold and I are ready to move to the next stage, which is back to where we began. We are now, with your help if you are reading this, in search of the next grant or gift that will allow us to develop the means of bringing improved in-depth citizenship education to American Christians.
This is another of Skillen’s contributions which consider contemporary pacifist and anabaptist scholarship, this time the work of Stanley Hauerwas With the Grain of the Universe (2001), John Howard Yoder For the Nations (1997) and Richard Hays The Moral Vision of the New Testament (1996). Why does he spend so much time in drawing attention to writers of pacifist persuasion?

Firstly, it is because of their appeal to the Bible. To sum up, then, these authors believe Christians are called to live in an entirely new community, a new polis. And this polis should be characterized by, among other things, non-violence. But are these ideas biblical? The article is thus set forth as a contribution to the discussion among Christians as to how the biblical teaching relates to our political life. Secondly, it is because this appeal to the bible, in this context, actually builds upon a tradition of scholarship that has come to have a new relevance since the events of 9/11. The “war on terrorism” has given new impetus to the pacifist cause. Thirdly, in a later work (No.431 “Reformed ... And Always Reforming?” (2009)) Skillen observes: Most Christians today, we can probably say, are Anabaptist in the sense that they contend for free churches in open societies with governments that give equal treatment to all citizens regardless of their faith. It was the anabaptist Schleitheim Confession of 1527 that described the responsibility of government as falling “outside the perfection of Christ”. Many evangelical Christians have a view of politics that confirm this - they do not see government and political responsibility as integral to Christian discipleship.Turning to Hauerwas, Hays and Yoder, Skillen observes that they all believe that Jesus Christ has called his followers to build a new polis. Hays’s pacifist view depends on his interpretation of the bible and in particular Romans 12-13 which is read as a condemnation upon all violence including the taking of vengeance upon one’s neighbor. The problem with this view, Skillen argues, is that it leaves no room for Government as God’s servant, which includes within its responsibility the just execution of that vengeance (Romans 13:1,4). Thus the pacifist assertion that government office is off-limits for Christians does not agree that Paul is telling Roman Christians to recognize Christ’s lordship by loving and serving their neighbours for their good, in every office they may hold. In a summary of what Christian political responsibility means for office bearers and citizens, Skillen sums up his differences: I agree entirely with Yoder that the Bible is concerned with the differences between “right politics and wrong politics.” ... Yoder, Hauerwas and Hays confuse the Bible’s teaching on creation and redemption. The material in this review is expanded and developed in Skillen and Pavlischek “Political Responsibility and the Use of Force” (No.310).


This is a contribution to a “dialogue” with Oliver O’Donovan and, as an explanation of the work of the Center for Public Justice, seeks to open up discussion with O’Donovan and, in relation to his book The Desire of the Nations, explore differences in interpretation of, and action in response to, the Bible. Welfare Policy and Religious Freedom describes how “Charitable Choice” reflects the two kinds of pluralism that are part of “principled pluralism”. The next section Action on Welfare Reform and Reading the Bible explains the religious basis upon which CPJ has developed its approach to welfare reform. Reading O’Donovan brings Skillen to O’Donovan’s view that it is a mistake to interpret the resurrection of Jesus Christ in a way that ignores its meaning as ‘the restoration of creation’. This becomes the basis from which Skillen argues that O’Donovan’s line of argument here lays the basis for government’s responsibility to acknowledge and uphold all the non-government responsibilities God has given
to human creatures. But O'Donovan actually sees “society” transformed but not
government. Church, Society and Rulers discusses O'Donovan’s use of the term
“secular” by which such institutions are defined as existing within the natural
order, the cycle of birth and death. In Romans 13 Skillen asserts that the New
Testament, including this passage, suggests, if it does not teach, that political
authority and political communities find their proper place under Christ’s
authority as revelatory of something larger and eschatologically fulfilling, namely
the Holy City, suggesting that such a reading overcomes the problems that are
set up by O’Donovan’s conflictual reading of the passage. The discussion moves
on to History and the State. Skillen concludes critically that O'Donovan’s political
theory is not motivated by a vision of creation regained but is dominated by a
structurally narrow understanding of the church as one institution among many
in secular society, looking ahead to its eternal destiny while coexisting with
governments that are destined to pass away. O'Donovan’s reply appeals to
Jonathan Chaplin’s view that Skillen’s theory lacks “dispensationalism”.

325. “Civil Society and Human Development” in Roland Hoksbergen and Lowell
Ewert (eds) Local Ownership, Global Change: Will Civil Society Save

This essay was subsequently edited and re-drafted to become Chapter Two, with
the same name, of In Pursuit of Justice (No.341).

The views of Robert Putnam, Amartya Sen, Peter Drucker, Jean Bethke Elshtain
are considered in detail, as background to the major point of this particular
essay which is to apply biblical wisdom to the understanding of human
development. Putnam reduces bonding social capital to a means - a means to
the end of bridging social capital, which is the role he praises for civil society.
Sen’s view of economic prosperity seeks to overcome a reductionistic view that
treats humans as little more than producers and consumers. Drucker in certain
respects poses two solutions to the question: Who then attends to, or will attend
to, the needs once met by local communities, families, and neighbourhoods? The
two solutions that were posited during the twentieth century - the welfare state
to support families and workplace communities to provide a venue for human
fulfillment - are insufficient. Drucker poses “the social sector”. Skillen notes that
Drucker’s “social sector” (neither government nor corporation/employer but a
crucial third factor) is the question of the volume. Should the hope for
development in poorer countries now be grounded in the push for the creation
and strengthening of a social sector, or more social space, or a greater number
and variety of NGOs in those countries?

Elshtain, like Sandel, criticizes the mythic liberal notion of the “unencumbered
self” and rejects as illusory the ideal that democracy and free markets can
survive without undemocratic institutions such as the family. Alan Whaites
counters with the view that Family or clan independence must not be the highest
development goal of human society.

The section, Seeking Biblical Wisdom for Human Development discusses how
diverse institutions and relationships relate to their own normative development.
And in this way the arguments about economic development and democracy
should lead us to the view that economic development and democracy should
therefore be viewed, at least from one angle, as means to ends beyond
themselves. (Later in its 2004 version the sentence reads: Economic
development and democracy should therefore be viewed in this larger context of
human meaning.)

That turns the tables on the standard utilitarian calculus by which all
development is seen to be meaningful in so far as it contributes to economic
development and democracy. ... commerce, industry, politics and government
(should be seen) as meaningful, God-given dimensions of human-life-in-
community... Human development is defined as the unfolding, diversifying and complexifying exercise of all the responsibilities that belong to the generations of the image of God, and this occurs in a healthy fashion only when humans steward the earth creatively with all of their talents in obedience to, and in fellowship with, the One who has called them into service toward the destiny of face-to-face fellowship with God. The chapter concludes with five systematic statements.


These two political science books written from within the North American academy relate religion to American politics. In both books, American politics is the subject under examination and the role of religion is the chief concern, but the moralist (Adams) and the scientists (the writers of the Smidt volume) go about their work in very different ways.

Adams believes that Americans are adrift from their virtues, their source for building a society that conforms with God’s purposes. A renewal of Christian community is needed to rediscover authentic civic virtue. On the other hand Stacey Hunter Hecht (in the Smidt volume) does not find a decline of religious values.

This innocuous review has implicit respect for empirical social science and “evaluative” cultural critique. Presumably, for Skillen, there is indeed a place for such study of political life (“the system and its underlying culture”) just as much as the “critical” and evaluative scholarship that is the cultural critique of “public intellectuals”.


This first appeared in PJR 25:3 2002. Skillen recalls his family’s 1983 experiences of an Annapolis parade commemorating George Washington’s resignation of his commission as general of the revolutionary army after the 1783 Treaty of Paris. At that time [t]he newly independent Americans would not countenance a standing army. But in 2003, the three main branches of the US military have forces spread so far throughout the world that a new department of homeland security is now being proposed to help us defend ourselves against terrorists. Skillen’s short piece is directed at the deeply flawed and problematic “war against terrorism”.


Skillen in interview with Jerry Vreeman explains the public policy research focus of the Center for Public Justice in its long-term goal of equipping citizens, developing leaders and shaping policy. Public justice is emphasized to get attention to the normative responsibility involved in political participation. “Bureaucrat” should not be used as a swear-word. And a Christian political option involves work in educating citizens about the public-legal order and why Government has a monopoly in defining what has to be imposed to ensured public-justice - Skillen refers to the decision about the lawful side of the road on which to drive, or the colours of stop lights. Not everyone is a political activist. CPJ in seeking to promote responsible citizenship is not advocating people get activistic in an individualistic way, as if increased political campaigning is part of the social construction of one’s own identity. To start thinking about how one should be involved, with all the possible political issues with which an alert citizen may become aware, means being willing to undertake careful, long-term investigation to discovered how it is that this problem confronts us now with the consequences that are all too apparent. Vreeman asks about the International
Criminal Court, and Skillen replies with comments that explain how discussion about the ICC needs to go forward with wise, knowledgeable understanding of what precisely is involved. And how does one discuss the public-legal issues pertaining to the international order? "The world is shrinking. Populations, the globalization processes economically and everything else are bringing countries more and more together, so unless they can come up with World Trade Organization rules, etc., it’s going to be impossible to have anything but conflict and tie-up.”

2003


The story of American slavery and its end is a story of fundamental economic, social, and political change that opened not onto the kingdom of God in its fullness, however, but onto the long history of forced segregation and constantly improvised modes of racial discrimination. And even with the end of legalized racial discrimination, achieved against great odds in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, God’s will has still not been done completely on earth as it is in heaven. For more than racism is at fault and more than legal reform is necessary to overcome evil and reconcile humans to one another. Racism is an expression of derailed humanity, and whether institutionalized or merely personalized, dishonors both God and the image of God. The vast contributions being made to human development in this country by people of every color and culture, in every sphere of life, certainly bear testimony to the glory of the image of God. But in every area and from every kind of human, we also witness the sinful distortion of life, often institutionalized, with consequences that endure for generations. This too is our heritage, our American heritage.


A reply to a reformational political scientist at Dordt College who, along with others in his denomination, present a case for “gay marriage”. Skillen’s own writings on the subject for some considerable time before this, had identified the fact that homosexuals do not engage in sexual intercourse at all.

Moreover, as pointed out in the Public Justice Report article 2nd Quarter 2004 “Same-Sex ‘Marriage’ is not a Civil Right”, (No.343) Skillen articulates a view that suggests that van Geest is not only wrong in his understanding of rights but also seriously deficient in his understanding of how government is called to do justice to marriage, and family life as well.

This argument also makes use of the view that government, in pursuit of public justice, must correctly identify the kinds of structures that are present in the public sphere. Correct identification of marriage must be one of those, and to argue that same-sex “marriage” should be accorded the same legal rights as the marriage of a man and a woman, not only is a structural misunderstanding, it is a complete misunderstanding of the way friendships operate in a public legal context.

Moreover, to make the appeal for same-sex marriage as Van Geest has done to Abraham Kuyper’s famous designation of “sphere sovereignty” (see also comment on the ICS conference of June 1992 No. 217) suggests an attempt to accommodate a Biblically-directed view of sphere sovereignty with a neo-liberal vision of autonomous human social construction.
David Little’s “Conscientious Individualism: A Christian perspective on Ethical Pluralism” runs to 27 pages with 65 footnotes.

Skillen’s 12 page article has no footnotes but is also a commentary on Little’s argument. It focuses upon Little’s appeal to Roger Williams as justification for his approach (see Skillen’s previous comment on Williams in No 164 where he referred to the view of Williams cited by William Lee Miller in The First Liberty. See also No.126 and No.139).

Skillen addresses Little’s attempt to build a case of a “weak theory” of ethical pluralism. Something more fundamental than Little’s “conscientious individualism” is required, because the individual conscience is not the ultimate seat of authority. The Creator and the Creator’s moral law function as the authority and the normative standards for human beings…. Biblically speaking, the commandments were not addressed to individual consciences but to persons in community, including those who held institutional authority as parents, priests, elders, judges, kings, and prophets.

The reply to Little begins with Skillen’s alternative view of Williams’ contribution. What we might call Williams’s strong affirmation of structural pluralism is on display in his distinction between church and state. At the same time, within each of those spheres he was not at all an ethical pluralist and certainly not an ethical relativist. The article continues with a section The Origin of Criteria for Making Distinctions? Little’s conscientious individualism does not provide criteria for distinguishing the types and limits of different social authorities.

The next section Structural Pluralism and Ethical Legitimacy discusses the diversities that we have to face in our life in God’s world, and this involves two kinds of identifications and distinctions. The first kind concerns the diversities that belong to the legitimate differentiation of human society in this world, created by God.

There are different cultures, languages, and types of institutions and innovative human behaviors. The discussion then moves on in an interesting way, a way that is not entirely clarified although it is not lacking in systematic argument. The second kind of identification and distinction has to do with this matter of the correct or incorrect use of a language, or the ethical and unethical types of behavior in each differentiated sphere of life.

The next section Conscience in Creaturely Context deals with the problem of allowing people, fellow image bearers of God, to make their own conscientious mistakes. Further Illustrations of the Commitment to Pluralist Principles discusses government responsibility to respect the rights of all citizens, particularly women and the unborn.

This is a complex argument. It deals with complex ethical and legal argument in a highly differentiated social context. But whereas the logic of my position could allow for the legal recognition of polygamy as a form of marriage (even though I don’t think it is an ethically obedient form), the logic of my position leads in the political sphere to rejecting the identification of homosexual relationships as a form of marriage. Arguments about good and evil need to be developed. But they need to be given a firm basis by appropriate jurisdictional distinctions among institutions and relationships.

For Skillen the plural structure of human society is radically non-reductionist and his view is based in the biblical confession that in God’s creation Jesus Christ is the lord of all, the judge and redeemer of the very reality that was created in, through, and for him in the first place.

The Editor’s note for this lead article for Pro Rege XXX1:1 March 2003 reads as follows: “James Skillen gave a special lecture at Dordt College on October 10, 2002, in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Center for Public Justice and the Association for Public Justice. The following article is Dr Skillen’s expanded and revised version of that lecture.” This is then repeated in the article’s only footnote which is indicated next to the title. The article, written before the invasion of Iraq, is not only important for the development of Skillen’s theoretical perspective, which since the September 2001 terrorists attacks had increasingly been articulated in the pages of *PJR*. Nor is it important simply for the ongoing work of CPJ as an independent organisation. This lecture was delivered in CPJ’s “heartland”, an important document in the evolution of the Dordt/CPJ relationship. That is hinted at in the Editor’s note with the historically accurate, but literally peculiar “double designation” of the Anniversary of CPJ and APJ. (see No.34). The collection of political theory emphasizing a pluralistic vision for political science began with academic collaboration at Dordt College. (No.211).

The Introduction spells out the immediate issue that is to be addressed: how is the United States, the world’s sole remaining super-power, to conduct itself internationally? The National Security Strategy of 2002 is an attempt to respond to a profound crisis in the United Nations (UN) system of international politics, a crisis that has been deepening since the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new form of international terrorism. This then will also have to be an examination of the philosophy behind the new American strategy which predates 9/11 by at least a decade. How and why is the US responding to the critical weakness of the UN, and what will be the consequences? This is the framework for the article which covers the Origins of the UN System over 350 years of political history since the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Then a description of the International System Crisis is described by which the structure of international relations is ill-fitted to deal with the way terrorist threats exploit the power imbalances that are obviously manifest within the UN system. The National Security Strategy - 2002 with its unabashed freedom-idealism is discussed, and then Support and Criticism of the New Security Strategy explores the strategy’s inner contradictions and ambiguities. Skillen makes this telling observation: For the fact is that no state exists solely on the basis of its own sovereignty. This then leads Skillen to the cusp of his point about the “war” on terrorism in Distinguishing the Fight Against Terrorism from War. The language used by the Bush administration to call the fight against terrorism a war is indeed a step on the path to dictate the terms of the new world order. And so the Conclusion summarises the article by suggesting the need of a radical revision of the NSS to stress the US aim of defending itself according to just-war criteria and of helping to build a more just international and transnational system of law and order.


In this review Skillen says it is really two books that lack integration. The first part is the author’s attempt to list 7 ways politics relates to value systems. There are four major religious value systems ... monism, absolutism, ecstasism and transcendental idealism. The three major secular value systems are egoism, collectivism and civil humanism. Reichley implies that the US founders adopted “transcendent idealism” “a value system that legitimizes both individual rights and social authority and establishes a balance between the two.” He seems to imply that such a system is essential to republican government. Skillen wonders whether Reichley is suggesting a universal resolution of faith and politics or
whether it is merely specific to the US Constitution. The second part of the book is historical and the abstract typological categories do not really make an appearance. Reichley's history is worth reading, says Skillen, but he is left wondering whether Reichley believes that the values that come from religion require ongoing religious vitality to refresh them. Skillen is not convinced by this book that religion, as he describes it, is essential to republicanism, as he presents it. And I find this perplexing since I am convinced that Christianity, on its own narrative terms, offers the strongest foundation for genuinely open societies, for recognition of the integrity of both government and non-government institutions, and for the equal public treatment of all faiths.


This is an important contribution to legal and political philosophy and also to Dooyeweerd studies. The article begins with a brief reference to the state of Dooyeweerd scholarship and an outline of what motivated Dooyeweerd’s philosophy. Dooyeweerd’s philosophy announced the importance for philosophy of giving its own account for the possibility of philosophical thought. Thus the first section after the introduction is titled The Necessity of a Cosmonomic Idea. For any philosophy to be developed and sustained as philosophy, it needs to give an account of its own cosmonomic idea in its confrontation with the cosmonomic ideas that are basic to other philosophies. Dooyeweerd’s view of The Cosmonomic Idea of Creation Order with a summary of the General Theory of Modal Law Spheres follows. Discussion includes the contribution of Thomas Aquinas and Thomist philosophy having attempted to accommodate biblically directed understanding with Aristotelian concepts. Discussing the “natural law” tradition of philosophy and political philosophy, Skillen devotes a section to Law/ Norm Pluriformity. This is a brief outline of an argument by which Dooyeweerd had given critical philosophical grounding to Kuyper’s idea of “sphere sovereignty”. Modal and Individuality Structures is a discussion of Dooyeweerd’s philosophical distinction between the modalities of the creation order, on the one hand, and the diverse kinds of creatures and institutions, on the other. So there are various dimensions of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy in play. The sub-sections that follow are:

1. Individuality Structures and their Modal Qualifications - norm-responsiveness is something other than form-embodiment through rational application;

2. Historical Differentiation and Integration - history for Dooyeweerd is about the biblical mandate for humans to fill, cultivate and have dominion over the earth [as] a multigenerational responsibility that unfolds within the cosmonomic order of creation;

3. Justice in Differentiated Societies. The normative considerations that should govern the government’s task in a justly ordered res publica is outlined. Dooyeweerd’s theory is compared with that of Thomas Aquinas, in particular where Thomist philosophy refers to public life in terms of a whole and its parts. The footnotes refer to ongoing critical discussion about the relation of subsidiarity (the Roman Catholic “common good” tradition) to sphere sovereignty (the Calvinist “principled pluralist” standpoint). (No.405)


"When government officials focus chiefly on letting people do what they choose, their primary aim is to reduce or remove public barriers to individual choice. They tend to give less attention to government’s other responsibilities, namely to strengthen the quality of the public infrastructure - the commonwealth and the natural environment - that supports the freedom of individuals and nongovernment organizations."
“What has been the Bush administration’s answer to almost every economic condition, for example? Cut taxes. If government is running a surplus, cut taxes. If it is running a deficit, cut taxes. In other words, reducing taxes that may inhibit market activity will lead indirectly to a greater public good at the other end.”

That ideology drives the US Government’s “laissez-faire”, free-market economy. Well, argues Skillen. The view was not limited to economic matters. The essay is about Iraq and the Bush Government’s view that Iraqi freedom will follow if the barrier - Saddam Hussein - is removed. Laissez-faire is not enough to ensure a healthy Iraq, let alone a healthy USA.

2004

337. “Democracy, Justice and God’s Patience in Christ” Covenant Magazine Summer, 20-23. This is from Skillen’s 2003 Francis Schaeffer Lectures "Jesus and Caesar; Christian Faith and Political Process”.

“Real citizenship, and we almost don’t know this in the United States, is where citizens who have solidarity in the same country have different views about what it ought to be and argue about it. Our tendency --- which is the winner takes all mentality to elections --- adopts the following approach: ""We’re right and there’s no use in talking to those folks because they’re hopeless. We just need to beat them and if we beat them in the election then we don’t have to pay attention to them." And that is not politics. That’s an attempt to stymie the possibility for others to be citizens and not take them seriously. But of course what it sets in motion is that when they win, they ignore “us” and don’t take "us" seriously. So it’s not how to learn how to argue about the differences we have and to clarify them. We ought to be able to state up in a congressional place, or in a state legislature or in a hall like this among different people and stand up among different people and make a convincing case from our point of view as to why Government ought to do this. And somebody else stands up and as a free citizen makes their case --- we clarify differences and then say, ""I am going to try and win at the polls to get this view enacted. I recognise that that’s going to contradict your view. We better work out how we are going to keep on talking to each other because both of us are still citizens." That is a different kind of art, a different approach.”


This is a contribution to “The Pew Forum Dialogues on Religion and Public Life” of which Jean Elshtain is a co-chair and Luis Lugo serves as the Forum’s executive director. From the published goals of the Forum, the table of contents and the contents of Skillen’s observations, this seems like a response to the insistence by many that America needs to widen its public discourse. The dialogue needs to be much wider than merely paying attention to the views of one or other sector of “religious opinion.” The dialogue with 39 contributors (plus others) reads as a “Who’s Who” of American religious public debate. Skillen’s comments are in response to two major stimulus contributions by Cuomo and Souder. In his 5 pages, Skillen asks whether candidates for public office are able and willing to articulate their politically religious convictions.

Further questions follow about economic justice and how the biblical viewpoint does present a distinctive view which neither Christian seems willing to advocate. Skillen puts forward a hunch; these unresolved and seemingly unresolvable questions fail to adequately identify the basis of the crisis in America’s civil religion.
This religion - the glue of the Republic for almost two hundred years - is now in trouble because its nineteenth century tenets no longer grip a large majority of Americans. Religious diversity in private is acceptable; it is, however, problematic in public and that’s why the truly probing questions directed to candidates at election time need to be about where they stand in relation to American civil religion.


As the author’s by-line tells the readers, this is an edited excerpt from With or Against the World (No.347) which was due to be published the next year. The essay outlines the path the US has taken, choosing to define itself as the exceptional state, with a world-historical mission. It identifies the basic ideas that have motivated the 2002 National Security Strategy. The Bush Administration has a tin ear for the imperial overtones of its security rhetoric, and unfortunately most Americans are similarly tone deaf. It is a form of deafness we can no longer afford. Simplistic freedom-idealism is undermining strategically sound and effective statecraft. The article discusses how Americans typically view themselves and their global contribution. It highlights American blindness when it comes to acknowledging that the position it now occupies comes from a complex historical process in which America has benefited enormously from the work and co-operation of other nations.

The article relates America’s current idealistic interpretation of its hegemony with the New England “New Israelitism” and Enlightenment modernism. The view of freedom on which the NSS is based is a transcendent mission, a supranational standard, a universal eschatological goal, and a world historical spirit, to which the US and other countries must simply subordinate themselves. The US is the purpose driven state and sees no need to ask for the consent and co-operation of other nations. The ICC is not on the US radar.

The kind of security strategy devised by Bush and his colleagues is a pre-Westphalian international order in which the US will be the transnational guardian of freedom’s canon law.

The perspective is wracked with ambiguity and contradiction. The Bush administration’s international vision is exposed as a presumption that the globe is simply on its way to becoming “federated” under US power. The National Security Strategy of 2002 is, in short, American exceptionalism on overdrive. The outcome is likely to be anything but secure.

"[America] conspicuously lacks the voracious appetite for territorial expansion overseas that characterized the empires of the West European seaboard. It prefers the idea that foreigners will Americanize themselves without the need for formal rule - Niall Ferguson.

America is a peculiar sort of empire, and lately it is an empire peculiarly obsessed with security. Its preoccupation with self-preservation is related not only to the fact that it is a state, like other states, with an obligation to protect its own citizens from terrorism and other threats.

The US is also, in its own eyes, the exceptional state, with a world-historical mission. American national identity continues to be animated by the belief that the goal of history is democracy and freedom for every people - and that America is the model.

That is why Americans rarely interpret security in terms limited to simple national self-interest (much less imperial self-interest). Instead, security interests are legitimated in unabashedly idealistic (and self-flattering) terms; in order for the goal of freedom and democracy to be reaches by all peoples, America must remain unassailable as both exemplar and vanguard.
This essay published in the CRCNA denomination magazine anticipates the publication, in 2005, of Skillen’s book that examines America’s role among the nations (No 347). America faces great paradox. It’s military strength is enormous but, despite massive increases since 9/11, terrorism and its threats have not been staunched. Afghanistan is still beholden to warlords and Iraq’s stability is in question. The US finds itself co-operating with highly undemocratic regimes and fuelling the criticism of its allies. Toppling Saddam was supposed to hasten a middle east “two nation” solution. America’s foreign debt sky-rockets and the US reneges on the kind of discipline required to support the international bodies it helped to set up. The article in search of answers goes back to the “a city on a hill” commitments that viewed the United States as an exceptional nation. He develops the historical theme that has characterized his work on welfare and education reform identifying the 19th century civil religious unity as the “golden age” to which so many conservatives are wanting to return. But there is no return. Now the US is the world’s last standing super-power. We are, in our own eyes, a “reluctant superpower”, and when we must go into battle it is only in defense. As presidents Wilson and Bush and many others have said, America seeks no empire; greatness is something that has been thrust upon us. Yet to listen to Americans explain themselves one has to conclude that America’s mission is almost as grand as God’s plan for the world. This duality of a checked- and- balanced state under the rule of law on the one hand and a messianic nation with a grandiose mission far beyond our borders on the other helps to account for America’s approach/avoidance attitude toward world affairs.

The article continues by tracing Woodrow Wilson’s first world war crusade and the “covenant” of the League of Nations - centred in Geneva - to George W Bush’s 2002 National Security Strategy. Wilson had spoken of God’s commission to the reluctant super-power, whereas Bush adopts a secular vernacular when he appeals to the cause of freedom.

The International Criminal Court does not apply to Americans - America’s mission lifts America to a higher level. But, says Skillen, this is a wine too strong to be contained in the skin of a modest, constitutionally restricted republic. America’s refusal to be bound by international laws and restrictions actually foments the very problems it claims to be opposing in its “war on terrorism”.

The US cannot stop terrorism by itself even if it unilaterally takes distance from its obligations to international law. The way the US can help is by cooperating with States that do respect international law. Cooperation is the key.

And in conclusion Skillen quotes from Walter Russell Mead Power, Terror, Peace and War: America’s Grand Strategy in a World at Risk (2004) “‘Whoever wishes to be first among you must become the servant of all.’ This is not just a piece of feel-good religious advice. It is a sober statement about the way enduring power works.”


This might serve well as a political science text even in university classrooms where the teacher disagrees with Skillen’s views.

Chapters 1 to 3 provide Skillen’s “Christian Democratic” approach and the titles of these three chapters indicate general questions, answers to which provide Skillen’s philosophy of public policy research. “What distinguishes a Christian democratic point of view?” (Chapter 1) makes a case for a distinctively Christian political contribution, even in politics like the USA, that, in the main, are oblivious to the possibility. “Civil Society and Human Development” (Chapter 2 - see earlier version at No.325) and “The Question of Being Human” (Chapter 3 -
Chapter in No.250) explain why any comprehensive philosophy of public policy has to deal with diverse social responsibilities in which all citizens are called to live out their incredibly complex lives.

These two chapters provide a useful perspective in which to explore the political-ethical issues of “body politics” - the widespread civil agitation for the recognition of homosexual marriages; political debate over the use of human seed and embryos for scientific and medical research; the way parental authority relates to psychic well-being; the intersection of race, religion and multi-culturalism.

As such they are a basis for the subsequent chapters: Chapter 4 “E Pluribus Unum and Faith-Based Welfare Reform” (see No.316); Chapter 5 “The Cause of Racial Justice” (develops themes in No.290); Chapter 6 “Equal Education for All” (a revision of No.199); Chapter 7 “Liberalism and the Environment” (a revision of No.82, No.201, No.266); and Chapter 8 “Citizenship and Electoral Reform” (a revision of Chapter 10 in No.236)


See No.450. Having read through all, or most, of Skillen’s published writings, it is as if, at some points, the argument begins to vibrate with anticipations about bringing about fundamental change to the political realities that confront the world, at home and abroad. One of the liberating aspects of a Christian political theory that takes note of Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique is the happy profession that Government exists by the grace of God, and if a good analysis of the structure government institutions can be developed, that too exists by the grace of God. So, to put it succinctly, one can make one's contributions in political theory and political journalism without the added spiritually exhausting burden of presuming that good government exists by the grace of theory and journalism. And so making a contribution in terms of exposing underlying assumptions about governance and citizenship in current political practise and policy-making finds its place and can happily step back and survey the overall scene and see what needs to be done next. By taking seriously one's political responsibility for Christian schools, for example, the political theorist or analyst, can look again for ways to assist in, as is done in this article, the education of Christian citizens. Though this is not an article written for Christian school pupils and students, it is written to encourage Christian teachers and educators to maintain a biblical challenge to those they teach. Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the starting point for Christian citizenship - a willingness to be citizens, but only on the basis of recognizing Jesus Christ as the supreme authority over Caesar. A brief history of Christian understanding, as a background to America’s view of citizenship as something public and different from the freedom Christians have to profess Christ as Lord in their hearts, homes, churches and private schools. And here is the head-on collision with the American civil-religious presumption of its own religious neutrality: Christianity should play an entirely supporting role by helping to shape the moral conscience of individuals who imagine that they create government and hold it accountable to themselves alone. This is a highly condensed version of the way American public policy has evolved through various "orders of pluralism" (No.316, and Chapter 4 in No.341).

Sectarian understandings of Christianity need to be dispensed with. The Christian way of life is not a private, sectarian way of worship and schooling, but a public discipleship encompassing all areas of life... Christianity and other religions are ways of life, not merely ways of worship.

The article is about how Christian schools should contribute to a student’s understanding of citizenship in a way that coheres with the encouragement given by family and church.
"Same-sex ‘marriage’ is not a civil right” PJR Second Quarter pp.6-7.

“The simple fact is that the civil right of equal treatment cannot constitute social reality by declaration. Civil rights protection function simply to assure every citizen equal treatment under the law depending on what the material dispute in law is all about. Law that is just must begin by properly recognising and distinguishing identities and differences in reality in order to be able to give each its due.”

Skillen explores the political demands for same-sex marriage in terms of the theory of human rights that is presupposed. Marriage law is under critique because in recognising marriage as the bond of a man to a woman, it is said to be in violation of human rights, that is, that all citizens have the supervening right to call things what they want to call them, and that civil law should be legislated to allow them to do so with respect to this relationship so central to the life of human generations.


"The responsibility of public governance for the common good—for the just ordering of the public commons—is, I believe, implicit in creation from the beginning. To be sure, the retributive function of government came about because of sin, after the fall into sin. Of course, there was no political governance structure in the garden of Eden. But neither were there symphony orchestras, or universities, or complex profit-making corporations. We nonetheless recognize that the unfolding of the human generations led to the development of human capabilities such as music, education, scientific research, and economic enterprise. In the same way, I would argue that with the development of ever more complex societies, public governance of the commons would also have developed as an integral part of our responsibility to have dominion over the earth, even if human creatures had not disobeyed God. Public laws and administration, including traffic laws and sewage systems, for example, would be needed even if there had been no sin. Yet apart from sin, there would have been no need for penal systems or government’s use of force against thieves, murders, and foreign invaders.

"An analogy might help here. Family life was “built into” creation. It was not established on account of sin. Yet had there been no sin, parents would never have had to punish their children for disobedience. The retributive functions of parenting arose because of the fall, but family life is original—creationally good.

"A further biblical reason for believing that public governance is part of the good creation is that the Bible likens God to a just king, and Christ is revealed as lord and king, not just for retributive purposes in this age due to sin, but for eternity. In other words, if government’s purpose were only to restrain sin and punish evil doers, then one would imagine that the biblical image of the new heavens and the new earth would be void of anything political and governmental. Once God’s final judgment has been completed, the only appropriate images of life with God would be those of family, friendship, and perhaps agriculture and shepherding, but not government. To the contrary, however, the new Jerusalem, the Holy City, in which there is no more crying or evil doing, is pictured for us in Ezekiel and Revelation and elsewhere as a well-governed political order with Christ on the throne.”
2005


As a lead-in to this article, Skillen refers to the essay in the New York Times, December 5, by Ian Buruma, “Is ‘Islamic Democracy’ Really Possible?” It is noteworthy because of its recognition of the possibility of Christian Democracy and its viable political contributions since the late 19th century in Europe. Buruma also mentions the salient contribution of Abraham Kuyper. If Christianity has given rise to distinctive Christian Democracy, might it be possible for Muslim Democratic parties to evolve? Skillen will draw attention subsequently to Turkey as a polity where this might have been a possibility. (No.381) This leads into a discussion of the concept of “world-view” and Skillen then gives an assessment of the publications of Nancy Pearcey Total Truth 2004 and David Naugle Worldview, the History of a Concept 2002. In discussing Naugle’s analysis of “worldview” the question of language and semiotics in relation to thought and politics is raised. (No.411)

346. “Anti-Faith Extremism” Prism (Jan-Febr) 36. [initially published PJR “Editor’s Watch”.

Reich’s concern about the politicization of churches and other non-profit organizations is quite legitimate. But his diatribe against Bush and conservative Christianity expresses such anti-religious extremism that one can hardly distinguish it from religious bigotry itself. Reich’s use of an extreme to issue a blanket condemnation is a powerful debating tactic but succeeds in pushing over a straw man. And then Skillen identifies the religious motive in Reich’s attack. His aim is to denounce the devil of the anti-modern by urging the renewal of faith in modernism. Those who denounce as extremism something they don’t understand are also a danger to deliberative democracy and an open pluralist society.

347. With or Against the World: America’s Role Among the Nations Rowman and Littlefield.

This book describes President Bush’s National Security Strategy of 2002, as an idealist tract, calling for the shaping of a new world order (p.101). That being said, it is not far-fetched to suggest that With or Against the World? is also a tract that adopts an alternative perspective to interpret the same political reality. Skillen develops an argument that culminates in an explanation of why normative statecraft is short-circuited by the prevailing trends of American foreign policy whether they be idealist or realist (Chapter 10, 133-147).

Skillen does not attempt to criticise Bush’s idealism from the standpoint of a counter-balancing “Christian” realism. The reader’s attention is drawn to “Forgotten depths” (Chapter 2) which expands upon Skillen’s negative answer to the question “Did 9/11 change the world?” (Chapter 1). The subsequent discussion calls into question the confusing rhetoric of Bush’s “war” on terrorism, providing a credible account of the religious confrontation between radical Islamism and American exceptionalism. Because this “initial exploration” limits itself to itemising a vast range of philosophical, historical and political questions, the volume can be read as an extended bibliographical essay, a guide to the burgeoning literature, from a “normative statecraft” standpoint (pp.140-147).

As a Christian “tract for the times” it avoids “that dangerous impulse of journalistic superficiality” to which Dooyeweerd drew attention (Herman Dooyeweerd Roots of Western Culture (1979) p.55).

Chapters 3, “Earliest Sources of the West’s Design on the World”, 4 “Western Christendom” and 5 “The Rise of the Modern State” provide an account of world history that preceded the American Revolution of 1776, but they are also the
most recent contribution to reformational formulations that explain the “roots of western culture”.

In Chapters 6 “The American Republic: Witness to the End of History”, 7 “Wilsonianism: From Witness to Vanguard”, and 8 “Another American Century?”, Skillen outlines the emergence of the “America First” doctrine and thereby explains why it is a spiritual competitor with a biblically-directed Christianity.

Chapter 9 explores the question of war, just war and pacifism.

By way of conclusion (Chapter 10 “What Role Among the Nations?”) Skillen sketches a role for America, which for all its global hegemony, must face up to the “great underachievement of the West’s design on the world”, a failure to discover the path to just international and transnational governance. The question is whether the United States will stand with or against the world in rising to this challenge (p.xi).

348. “Introduction: Community, Society and Politics” (pp.253-255) & “The Common Good as Political Norm” (pp.256-278) in Dennis P McCann and Patrick D Miller (eds) In Search of the Common Good T&T Clark.

This is the Introduction, and initial essay, in the final section of the book headed Community, Society and Politics. The preceding sections are, in order: Biblical Dimensions in which the commandments, Jonah and Paul’s letters are considered; Classical Voices considering Thomas Aquinas, Catholic Social Teaching and how public discourse relates to the common good; Whose Good? Whose Commons? Which looks like a motley collection of essays about community and associational life, beauty, privilege and performance.

Skillen’s “Introduction: Community, Society and Politics” begins in this vein: “The phrase “common good” covers a multitude of sins as well as a host of constructive and even redemptive ambitions, admonitions, and anticipations. The concerns of the next four essays have to do chiefly with the relation of social diversity to a highest, or broader, or ultimate community that can be considered truly common and capable of representing or realizing the common good.”

After summarizing his own chapter, he provides a précis of the chapters by Max Stackhouse, William Cavanaugh and Robert Jenson. The book originated from the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, in a series “Theology for the Twenty-First Century”. Skillen stresses that for this paper the common good is a trans-subjective norm for political responsibility rather than, first of all, a common experience or a shared idea. There may be contention over the common good but this arises because of an inescapable norm-responsiveness built into human existence. Humans cannot escape the demands of justice. In criticism of the viewpoint of John Rawls, Skillen affirms that none of us is free to assess, from a position of neutrality, the vast array of experiences and ideas about the meaning of life before we enter the world we might prefer. The search for a neutral standpoint from which to fix our notion of “the common good” before we assume responsibility for thinking about and shaping society is a mythic and ultimately futile search. Moreover: our best efforts may not promote the common good at all.

An historical discussion of Views of the Commons and of the Common Good follows (which in some respects follows the outline on citizenship in No.271) covering The Biblical Heritage with reference to Daniel Elazar and N.T.Wright’s view of the Pauline teaching in critical engagement with the Roman Imperium, Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions that allowed for politics in terms of all human associations and functions being parts of the rational moral whole which was the polis. Slaves, women and children are less human than mature men and rational discernment by wise rulers define the best principles of government.
A discussion is then developed from Christendom to the Modern State. By the thirteenth century the Roman Catholic Church was essentially functioning as the widest, largest integrator of social and political life in the European world. Political authorities were diffuse and of many kinds.

Modern Synthetic Ideas is a section which considers the ideas of the common good that have arisen in the West since the 16th century. Marxism and anarchism are reviewed in two paragraphs. The undifferentiated political realm of pre-Maoist China is described with its rule by the Son of Heaven which became the default basis from which Mao built China’s “modern” societal integration. It was different from Confucian integration in subtle ways that were administered by the party. The UN Declaration on Human Rights and the Genevan Conventions on warfare are mentioned en passant, and recent theories of William Galston, Alan Gewirth and Michael Novak. The chapter concludes with Seeking the Common Good. The insights of Gewirth and Novak are useful but neither of them answer the question of responsibility for the political commons and of the normative identity of the political community. Better and stronger institutions of transnational governance are needed, Skillen writes, agreeing with Max Stackhouse’s emphasis. Finally the views of Robert Kaplan, advocating a pagan ethos for American politics, are again reviewed (see No.323). Kaplan tries to suggest that a Judaeo-Christian ethic is private by definition and fails totally to appreciate the Christian contribution to the differentiation of human society across the globe. It is a view blinded by its own Machiavellian virtue.


This is the prologue to a CRCNA Synodical Report that seeks to articulate the urgency of establishing and maintaining peace as a proper purpose of just governing and as part of the calling of the people of God in Christ throughout the world. Warfare, if and when justified as a last resort, can only have as its aim the overcoming of injustice that violates peace and the establishment or recovery of a just and peaceful public order. The REC Focus published the initial “Revised Version” of the Prologue in March 2004. The prologue is clearly designed to function as an exposition of the biblical mandate for the Committee’s work - the study of war and peace. The prologue begins with Matt 5:9 and Rom 12:18 “live at peace with all” and then describes the common turmoil among Christians, those who see biblical religion requiring them to defend their country’s military engagement, and those who take a pacifist stance. The first thing we need to remember is that the church - the people of God in Jesus Christ - is a community that transcends all national and state boundaries. The prologue emphasizes Government as a calling from God, with Christians called to support and contribute to the development of just government at all levels even if government, like every human institution, can do evil and perpetrate [violent] injustice. At this point, Skillen makes an observation that relates the variety of views identified by him in his Scattered Voice (No.192) to his Kuyper lecture “American Statecraft” (No.300) where he identifies the deep American sensitivity to the institution of government since it was given “on account of sin”. That is why caution, criticism, constitutional means of accountability, positive proposals for change and at times, civil disobedience are called for in order to encourage governments to fulfill their God-given task. (This lists the various approaches of “cautious conservatives”, “pro-justice advocates”, “civil rights activists”). The discussion then discusses government as a God-given task, Moses and the giving of the law, the view of justice found in the wisdom literature. Israel’s one-time military role in God’s cleansing of the land is also discussed and special attention is paid to the Divine admonition to Israel not to take pleasure in military power. The coming of Christ, who fulfilled the OT law, is truly significant since now all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Him, and so His commission is no
mandate for a territorial polity, nor a crusade that requires submission to any earthly ruler, but a movement that will from generation to generation take the gospel of the Kingdom to the whole world. The NT view of government is outlined with a brief description of how Christians began to formulate criteria for just governing and defense that would meet NT standards. The use of force and the threat of force is a limited but integral part of Government’s authority, but it entails much more than this. The criteria for making war justly are discussed briefly and the prologue concludes with a discussion of the dominant American world-view that enshrines idolatrous themes and therefore demands the critical and repentant examination of all Christians.


See No.345. This is a translation and edited version of Skillen’s article “The Question of a Christian Worldview; Books by Nancy Pearcey and David Naugle” from PJR 18 March 2005. In a New York Times December 5, 2004 article, Ian Buruma raised the possibility of “Islamic democracy” suggesting that Islam, as a world-historical religion, stood in need of its own Abraham Kuyper. The question is raised as to whether “religious politics” can help in the search for a non-imperialistic political order. In reply to Buruma, Skillen says that where statesmen like Kuyper held tenaciously to the conviction that God is sovereign and that no human institution, including the state or church, can be the sole representative of God on earth, then a new pluralistic view of the political community emerged, making possible the democratic participation of all citizens in the political community without dismissing or crushing the faiths by which they live. (This last comment contrasts sharply with Dhimmitude, the submission required of non-Muslims to the dar-al-Islam). Everyone lives by some faith, some world-view. Skillen reviews Pearcey’s Total Truth (2004) and Naugle’s Worldview: the History of a Concept (2002) notes how these books point that out even if they do not concentrate on political life and thought. But if Christian politics is to emerge it will have to be via those who can demonstrate in practice what a Christian world-view means and requires. Nancy Pearcey was part of the “Schaeffer renaissance” at Wheaton in the 1960s referred to in Skillen’s Francis Schaeffer Institute lectures at Covenant Seminary


This is a collection of various evangelical perspectives on ethics and politics. The range is from progressive to conservation. Skillen observes that “Toward” in the book’s title is appropriate because the book does not delve into “public policy” argument. The contributions of Sider - his biblical rationale for political philosophy- and Wolterstorff - contending for a creation basis for civil government rather than human sinfulness - are notable. The book points in a different direction to prevailing Religious Right and Religious Left ideologies.


“My aim in this review essay”, writes Skillen, “is to compare and contrast these books along three lines. First, how do they appeal to God and use the Bible? Second, what are they after? In other words, what do they want to inspire of cause to happen? And third, what do they tell us about the quality and potential
of Christian citizenship in the United Kingdom and America - as well as other parts of the world - today?” In conclusion he writes: “For all that is good in these three books, they help to expose great weaknesses in the Christian community today, perhaps especially the Christian community in the United States... There is much in these books that provides food for thought and motivation for taking civic life more seriously. What is needed beyond that, however, are real organizational efforts that can bring Christians together in political service.”


Richard Land’s speech included: “I do believe that God has blessed our nation in providential ways and that the Bible tells us that to whom much is given, much is required and that America has a special purpose in the world. And that purpose is to be the defender of freedom, the propagator of freedom, not in attempting to impose American ideals on the world, but our belief that these are universal ideals. Freedom is a universal ideal.” He continued: “I believe in American exceptionalism. And that is not a doctrine of pride. It is not a doctrine of privilege. It is not an attempt to maximize our sovereignty. It is not nationalism. It is a belief that America has been blessed in this [world] in incredible ways.”

The civil-religious confession of Land is notable referring to George W Bush’s Presidential inaugural using the poetic phrase a Virginia statesman, John Page, to affirm his belief about the role of the United States in the world community. Page had written to Thomas Jefferson two weeks after the Declaration of Independence: “God preserve the United States. We know the Race is not to the Swift nor the Battle to the Strong. Do you not think an Angel rides in the Whirlwind and directs this Storm?” And hence Land’s analysis begins and ends with that confession of faith.

Skillen begins by discussing “unilateral action”, “inevitably and invariably a way of relating to others. However much one might imagine that a single state takes action on its own behalf for its own interests and benefits and for whatever else it does it necessarily implicates itself in how others respond to and react to those actions. Established relations among states .. requires and implies mutual agreements [and] that is why there are multiplying international organizations, a growing number of treaties and arrangements in order to stabilise the rules of the game, to make clear what it is we can take for granted about one another and that among other things [ensures] that we can count upon states to keep the contract. One of the fundamental rules articulated many centuries ago about international relations is pacta sunt servanda - compacts must be kept. If you can’t count on the other country to keep the agreement we have just entered into, it will become increasingly difficult to trust, to depend upon, mutually agreed upon rules. Increasingly these multi-lateral, multi-dimensional agreements become institutions.”


https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/1029

“Approximately 30 percent of Americans do not earn enough money to own a home. Why then should federal tax policy give a tax break to those who can afford homes worth more than $312,000 - and even vacation homes on the side - when that does nothing to help those who are unable to buy homes.”
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/1027

“Ask yourself just one question. During all the argument over the past three weeks about whether the US forces should leave Iraq quickly or stay the course, why was there so little reference to the upcoming Iraq elections on December 15?”


The article is a painstaking analysis of the decision to go to war in Iraq, and its aftermath, and it is evaluated in terms of the Criteria of Justifiable Warfare - legitimate authority; just cause and last resort; right intention; proportionate means; reasonable expectation of success; noncombatant immunity and proportionate use of force in combat. Serious questions are about America’s standing across the globe. The case can surely be made that through its pragmatic and utilitarian approach, has undermined America’s much needed contribution to global stability and security.

2006

357. “What distinguishes the Center for Public Justice?” 4 January
See No. 279.
https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/political_community

This is a document that has gone through various editions since its initial formulation in a two-part series in Public Justice Report in 1998. What is the Center for Public Justice? Why does it exist? What does it do? How does it differ from the Christian Coalition or a church lobby organization or a think tank? This essay seeks to explain the Center’s identity, it’s commitment to principled pluralism, its comprehensive approach, its international perspective.

The most recent version reads as follows: “The Center for Public Justice approaches government and citizenship from a wide- ranging, comprehensive perspective. The Center seeks to do justice from a Christian- democratic perspective by recognizing different religions and points of view and keeping the public square open to people of all or no faiths. The Center believes government's authority is not limitless and that it should respect the responsibilities and rights of individuals and organizations. We seek to act with a comprehensive, constitutional concern for political life in all of its dimensions—domestic as well as international” (March 30, 2006).

The dissemination of the 1998 essay coincided with “Basic Affirmations of the Center for Public Justice” distributed in May-June 1996 which affirmed principles basic to a 7-part series that ran from March/April 1994 until November/December 1996.

The Biblical Call to Social Responsibility March/April 1994;
The Question of Authority May/June 1994;
What Constitutes a Political Community; September/October 1994;
Government with Representation January/February 1995;
Political Fairness and Equity July/August 1995;
Government and the Responsible Society May/June 1996;
358. "Intelligent Design as Science" PJR, 1st Qr. 29:1


The discussion has arisen due to “the inappropriateness of judges and public officials making decisions about what teachers should teach.” Skillen introduces this essay: “It is a delight, now, at this juncture to be able to point readers to an excellent assessment of Intelligent Design by Uko Zylstra, a professor of biology at Calvin College. Zylstra published a substantial essay on the subject titled “Intelligent-Design Theory: an Argument for Biotic Laws” in the journal Zygon (vol.39, no.1 March 2004).”

Zylstra’s argument is that physical and chemical laws and change are insufficient to account for irreducibly complex biological structures and that the ID theorists postulate “intelligent” design to add credibility to the scientific account. It is however a modified reductionist argument.


In his essay on evangelical and American foreign policy ("God's country?" Foreign Affairs Sept/Oct 2006), Walter Russell Mead says at the outset, "Religion explains both Americans' sense of themselves as a chosen people and their belief that they have a duty to spread their values throughout the world." Yet Mead leaves the weighty implications of this sentence largely unpacked in the essay that follows. Mead makes the mistake of most commentators on religion and politics: he spends most of his time discussing theological and ecclesiastical characteristics of evangelicals compared with other Christians, which have relatively little to do with government and foreign policy. Consequently, he does not sufficiently illuminate the religiosity of Americans as Americans when they think of "themselves as a chosen people". That is the point at which the particular connection between Americanism and evangelicals, or Americanism and any other religious group, becomes truly significant for foreign policy.

THE CFIA FORUM: EVANGELICALS AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM James W. Skillen The Review of Faith & International Affairs, Volume 4, 2006 - Issue 3 Published Online: 26 Apr 2010

360. “Reading the Bible in Public” Comment March 3

There remains a potential in latter-day Christian approaches to politics, even amongst those who adopt a critical, post-Constantinian view of government, that the bible will be read as a private revelation about how God works via the private into the public. That arises from means-ends thinking of post-Constantinian, or neo-Calvinist, Christians.

Hence there is an ongoing need for a concerted effort to reconsider our reading of the New Testament and particularly the book of Acts. This little essay follows the essay “Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans” by N. T Wright (see “Rethinking Government’s Calling: Back to the Bible?” Public Justice Report 3rd Quarter, 2003 p.3 and also No. 313 above). Wright argues that Paul’s address to the Romans is a challenge to the cult which worshipped Caesar as divine.

The study of the New Testament needs to reflect upon the way the writer (of whatever book) asked the question about location. In the PJR article Skillen writes: Paul thus wants the Christians in Rome to see that their citizenship is not ultimately in Rome but in God’s Kingdom ruled by Jesus Christ ... Our location is defined not by Caesar's empire but by God’s creation and covenant. It is this idea that is worked out further in this most recent article. The article concludes with a re-affirmation of the calling Christians have been given to live and breathe the “air” of the bible, to live in subjection to the One God raised from the dead, the One who will judge and redeem the entire creation with all of its public squares.
361. “Political Parties” in Encyclopedia of Christianity Vol.4 Eerdmans, 76-77

This is an entry for a Christian encyclopaedia. It considers the meaning of the term and notes that parties are a modern (post 18th century English) invention, an outcome of the struggle for constitutional limitation of the monarchy and the emergence of parliamentary government. The impact of political ideologies to the work and contribution of political parties is noted.

The tasks of parties are outlined and the goal of winning power to influence Government specified. Parties are constrained by the system of representation in which they operate and the laws governing campaign finance.

Today parties are subject to significant change in structure and function. The entry concludes with a brief outline of how Christian political parties in Europe and South America operate and how they understand their contribution to the democratic processes of representative government.

362. “Speaking of War and Peace” with Kathy Vandergrift The Banner May.

http://www.thebanner.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=496 After the completion of CRCNA’s “Peace and War Report”, the editor of this CRCNA magazine “asked two of the committee’s members who have differing views to share their thoughts”. Skillen notes that the report is slightly off focus in not focusing sufficiently upon the Church’s task to encourage Christians to promote peace through just public governance. His concern is that the report has accommodated the view that Churches are on the side of “peace” and governments on the side of conflict.

Vandergrift asserts that it is important to focus upon peace rather than war. Skillen replies, Even if governments use force sparingly and never go to war, they must have the right to monopolize the use of force and be prepared to use it against unjust aggression. If you believe that government (as a monopolizer of force) is unjust, then yes, “Reformed pacifism” is an oxymoron.

363. “Immigrant Justice” Capital Commentary May 1 (Plumbline June 30)

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/1016

“The power of interest-group politics that now dominates Congress may make it impossible to enact the coherent, rational, and just reforms of immigration policy that are needed now.” This broadsheet is an analysis of the immigration situation in the USA which means that justice is some way off.

364. “All Politics is Global” Capital Commentary September 1.

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/1007

"it is certainly true that most American elections are for local offices - mayor, city council, school board, county council. state legislature, and governor. In fact, even with respect to national politics, all elections except for president are for local rather than nationwide candidates, because no senator or representative is elected by all Americans to represent the national constituency.... Yet stop for a moment and look more closely at almost any local issue. Under and around it surge the dynamic movements of a shrinking globe.”

365. “Confusion on Iraq” Capital Commentary October 27

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/1003

“The most fundamental problem in Iraq is not terrorism but the weak constitution and government that the United States helped to establish. The internal Sunni-Shiite conflict is now responsible for most of the unstoppable killing there. There is no American military solution for that.”
This is a commentary on a significant public exchange between two philosophers, Thomas Nagel and Michael Sandel in the New York Review of Books, October 5, 2006. “The dispute is this: Sandel argues that reasoning about justice sometimes requires one to engage directly in substantive moral and religious matters, whereas Nagel believes that reasoning about justice can set aside or remain neutral toward the personal moral and religious differences of citizens.” Skillen concludes: “Only within the framework of a richer view of human responsibility lived out in differentiated societies can we satisfactorily conclude arguments about who is responsible to do what. Nagel’s liberal individualism and Sandel’s morally sensitive communalism are insufficient for this task.”

2007
367. The Center’s 30th Anniversary Public Justice Report 1st Qr (Jan-Mar)
https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/Thirtieth_Anniversary_Year.pdf
This is in the PJR department titled: Editor’s Watch. This is an important reflection. It also throws a light on the editor’s relationship to APJ/CPJ and between the lines we can note his appreciation to his employer, the association which has encouraged him to provide a political and scholarly service which, among other things, comes to expression in an overview of the American political landscape in order to seek out paths of justice both for governments and citizens. There has been 30 years of trust invested in the Center, even though little has changed in the dominant pragmatism of American political thinking, and the work today shows the impact of a 20 year effort to delve more deeply into the reason for the absence of Christian political vision in the United States. The 30th anniversary reflection still places CPJ as the beginning of its mission, even if its understanding of American and global politics has deepened as a result of its 30-year witness and confrontation.

368. A New Christian Political Network in Europe PJR, 1st Qr, (Jan-Mar)
This is a report on the second congress of the European Christian Political Movement, December 6-7, 2006, held in Brussels at the European Parliament. Skillen, along with his CPJ colleague Stanley Carlson-Thies, were invited to address the gathering. Skillen's 8 point conclusion to his address is included in the article. These points specify: that the meaning of Christian politics in terms of the call by the Creator/ Redeemer to do justice; that political accountability is grounded in God-given norms to which all are subject; that all humans, every person, is to be treated as God's image-bearer; that Christian democratic politics must develop a global view of the common good; that CD politics should promote Government protection of the diverse responsibilities of human society; economic justice is a necessary precondition for market freedom; that the innocent and vulnerable must be protected and reconciliation and restorative justice promoted; Christian politics is one crucial aspect of good stewardship for the natural environment.

https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/welfare
This is a commentary on the CPJ's Guideline on welfare policy. It begins with a brief exposition of the center's view of "structural pluralism" - government must do justice to the real diversity of human social responsibilities as a matter of
principle - and "confessional pluralism" - government's obligation - again as a
matter of principle, is to give equal public-legal treatment to people of all faiths.

The first point concerns the call to be a neighbour which comes to all people and
to all institutions, including government. The second draws attention to
Government's public-legal responsibility to render such assistance giving
attention to the need and the responsibilities involved. The third point discusses
Government's responsibility in the face of poverty since poverty is very often a
generation to generation consequence of a structural injustice. The fourth aspect
explains why the prevention of poverty is tied to upholding justice for all,
encouraging all to take up their responsibilities. The fifth point concerns
Government's support for a thriving society that can develop a 'welfare sector'.
And the sixth point emphasizes Government's responsibility beyond a (generous)
welfare sector.

This brings Skillen to Lew Daly's critique of the Bush administration's "faith-
based initiative" as a populist endorsement of religious interest groups seeking to
build their own sub-cultures or enclaves: ... he is mistaken to associate the
center for Public Justice with a conservative market- minded bias. We are
Kuyperian and not libertarian. Daly is criticised for underestimating the true
significance of the welfare reforms. He does so because he underestimates the
value of confessional pluralism. The seventh point discusses Government support
for faith-based NGOs in terms of the First Amendment. There are important
freedoms at stake, for instance in terms of the hiring rights of bodies which
explicitly identify the faith upon which their welfare provision is based. This
should not be viewed as an automatic opt-out from Government funding
programmes.

370. Catholic Teaching On Religious Freedom PJR, 1st Qr, (Jan-Mar)

https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/
Catholic_Teaching_on_Religious_Freedom_A_Book_Review.pdf

This is a review of a book that aims to explain the Vatican II statement
"Dignitatis Humanae" (DH) which was central to John Paul II's contribution to the
Church's social magisterium, even if it had been adopted without a general
agreement on its rationale or intellectual foundations. It is claimed in the book
that DH has been widely neglected in American catholic social reflection, even if
it is now considered as an important milestone in the long-standing conflict
between the Church and the modern idea of freedom. DH has an unfinished
agenda which the book seeks to advance.

371. Still Wearing Blinders In Iraq PJR, 1st Qr (Jan-Mar)

https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/
Still_Wearing_Blinders_in_the_Iraq_Mission.pdf

Skillen argues that "war thinking" is basic to the Iraqi Study Group's report, the
administration led by President Bush, and others calling for a draw-down of
American troops. The all continue to think in terms of "war" but it is that thinking
which has brought them into a dire predicament that has no military solution: ... from the day that Saddam Hussein and his military fled Baghdad, the American
responsibility was to govern Iraq. There was no war to fight but rather good
government to establish. And so, the article can conclude that a .. decline of
American prestige, influence, and position in the world is real and our
contribution to the destruction of Iraq is a large part of the reason for that
decline. There is no set of quick pragmatic steps the US can take to reverse this
decline. What we Americans need is similar to what Iraq now needs; we need
sound and trustworthy government for both domestic and international affairs.
The US occupying forces did not reinforce its occupation which it needed to do if
it were to provide a system of just governance. When Saddam was toppled the
Bush administration seems to have assumed that some form of Middle Eastern magic would bring a new Iraqi government with a functioning democracy to the fore. And so, when US domestic demands require the US to hand over, the Iraqi Government to whom power is handed, becomes little more than a cover for a vacuum for which the US is responsible but doesn’t want to recognize.

372. Obama for President? Capital Commentary January 19
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/997
Skillen consider the possibility that Barack Obama will become a presidential candidate. Obama claims to represent a "new style of politics". This is brief exploration of what this might mean and whether it is likely. Skillen suggests three things which Obama will have to do: demonstrate a new approach to policy in his role as senator; begin to shape a talented team who could implement this policy programme; explain how he will tackle the problems of the nation’s electoral and legislative system.

373. The Religion and Society Debate Root and Branch 1 January 22
This is the initial edition of a new e-broadsheet, designed to address an emergent public debate. He Skillen reviews a Weekly Standard book review that consider the separation of church and state, as well as Financial Times op-ed piece. The famous biblical statement about "rendering unto Caesar:.." is discussed and it is conclusively argued that it is not an attempt by Jesus to separate church and state as so many so easily suggest. In biblical term Caesar does not control a jurisdiction separate from God’s jurisdiction, because no such jurisdiction exists. The second part of this initial discussion explores John Kay’s view that environmentalism is a kind of religion and therefore should be scrupulously avoided by business because business linked to faiths and ideologies is a sinister and unaccountable power.

374. American Polytheism Root and Branch 2 February 19
America very often presents itself as a country that gives its allegiance to the God of the Bible. This is a false assumption, says Skillen and a second error is to assume that Jesus Christ gives tacit endorsement to the polytheistic idolatry that dominates American culture, commerce and politics. Skillen suggests that ... to make sense of American public religiosity ... we need to look at what Americans - including many American Christians - believe about the god (or gods) of America and not first at what they believe about Jesus Christ. The discussion provides a perspective from which to approach the religious ways that Americans "do" politics. The views of J P Diggins (on Reagan) and Joe Laconte on the separation of church and state are critically evaluated.

375. The Newest Supreme Court Case Root and Branch 3 March 9
https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/The_Newest_Supreme_Court_Case.pdf
An exploration of the case brought by the "Freedom from Religion Foundation" before the US Supreme Court. The court is actually exploring the issue of whether a group of taxpayers has a constitutional right to come before the Court to challenge the government’s spending decisions. Skillen considers the substantive case to highlight the way in which such allegedly unreligious advocates seek the establishment of secularist beliefs. If successful such a case would not be the continuation of the separation of church and state but the establishment of government’s systematic violation of religious freedom for those citizens whose religions cannot be wholly disconnected from all educational, social-service, and family activities that are supported by government.
376. The European Union at 50 *Capital Commentary* March 30  
[https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/992](https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/992)

This is a brief overview of the EU and how it emerged from the EEC in the 1950s in the wake of two devastating world wars. It explores the EU's ongoing problems, the unresolved issues that still have an enormous impact upon its overall contribution to the world. The EU is not Utopia. It may yet fail. And others in the world may not learn the best lessons that can be learned from the history of the EU. Yet today, we should, with a degree of awe, lift a toast to what the last 50 years of cooperative institution building has achieved in Europe.

377. Conserving the Environment *PJR*, 2nd Qr (April-June)  
[https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/environment](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/environment)

This Guideline is set forth in the context of growing concern around the world about climate change. Its 8 points, as indicative of CPJ’s approach to policy research and advocacy, begins with a recognition of human dominion, the need for careful stewardship of God’s creation on terms set by God Himself. The second point emphasizes eco-logical sensitivity concerning an inter-dependent reality which in its totality depends upon God who made it - caring is much more than preparation for human use, even if that be normatively oriented - and Sabbatical rest is built into the fabric of human responsibilities.

If we are to continue on in our mandated task as stewards then we need to reckon with our need for a clean environment. Loving our neighbour as ourselves has generation-to-generation consequences. There are a variety of ways via different relations and institutions to exercise responsibility/ the "environment" has the character of commons and requires public-legal recognition. This is the point of entry for Government involvement, through taxation benefits or discouragements and other forms of enticement and regulation. Encouraging good stewardship is a part of government's task of ensuring, promoting, initiating, establishing, maintaining and defending public justice with respect to the environment. A radical re-evaluation of lifestyle is required and this means the need to promote a normatively led reconsideration of the details of every-day life. The changes in life-style at national-level must become part of concerted global efforts by governments, by transnational bodies (churches not excluded) and by all citizens taking greater care over their actions. The situation is critical. The time to act is now, both for short-term health and for long-term sustainability.

378. Hearing No Call To Public Service *PJR*, 2nd. Qr (April-June)  

This is in the PJR department titled: Editor's Watch. This is perhaps one of the most critical op-ed pieces of American political culture among Skillen's recent articles. It is about an issue central to political life. It is about public service. It notes that worries that are occupying senior people within the US Federal Government that bright young people are simply not coming forth in sufficient numbers for careers in public service. Though the military is "in near crisis over the need for troops", the State department will have to fill 120 positions (out of 400) by military personnel secondment.

The article puts these recent worrying developments "in context", by describing the predominant trends in the world-view of the "American way of life". An office of government is not something to which anyone really aspires or is encouraged to aspire to. American young people do not, for the most part, hear any call to public service. Government in this means-to-ends world-view is an obstruction to becoming who we really are - seekers after prosperity via the accumulation of property - and in this sense human become political solely to protect what they are essentially "by nature".
Opposing this world-view Skillen concludes by identifying the need for a change of heart-belief: To hear the call to public service one needs to believe that political community is part of who we are, part of what God created us for, that it belongs to us by nature. Public service is an authentic human calling, a vocation from God to uphold justice in human community - the political community.

379. Seeking Harmony in China Root and Branch 4, April 25.
In another essay concerned with the way religion appears in the political sphere, Skillen draws on another Financial Times article by Richard McGregor to discuss the attempt by China's leaders to revive interest in the previously disgraced Confucius by which they hope to promote a more harmonious social fabric. Confucius, says McGregor, provides the source for a new state religion in China.

Notes Skillen, There is no room ... for two (or more) ultimate authorities and comprehensive ways of life to coexist in the same place at the same time. A Confucius-blessed, communist-capitalist way of life ordained by the government that subordinates every other way of life to its own, is nothing less than a religious way of life.

It is not the privatized religions that are carrying the day in political developments around the globe.

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/989
This broadsheet comments on the National Association of Evangelicals recently published "An evangelical declaration Against Torture: protecting Human Rights in an Age of terror." Left unexplained is why so many soldiers and marines (and evangelicals) are willing to countenance questionable interrogation techniques. A broader understanding of just governance is needed, and the churches, colleges and seminaries have an important educative task that is crucial if human rights are to be properly protected by well-informed Christian citizens.

381. Watch Turkey! Root and Branch 5, May 21.
Turkey is one of the most important places in the world today in which to observe the dynamism of religions (including secularism) competing at root to shape society and government. This is a country of 78 million people, most of whom (about 90 per cent) are Muslim.

This broadsheet provides a brief description of the political situation that confronts Turkey as "Islamic democracy" becomes manifest via the longer-term effort of Muslims in various popular movements addressing the needs of large sections of Turkish society neglected by the military and the secularist elite. Will Turkey develop into a significant model for public life in other Muslim countries and around the world?

This is a republication of the May 11, 2007 Capital Commentary "Torture", No. 370 above. The issue is concerned with "Religion and Torture in an Age of Terrorism", and publishes the Evangelical declaration Against Torture.

When the directors of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) sign a declaration against torture, one can be sure that worries about the Bush administration's conduct of foreign and military affairs are deepening. Why? Because the NAE is a generally conservative coalition that represents many who have strongly supported President Bush.
After years of mounting evidence of Guantanamo Bay prisoner mistreatment and well-known abuses at Abu Ghraib that have not been satisfactorily answered by the White House and the Pentagon, many evangelicals now feel compelled to speak out.

The evangelical Declaration Against Torture is commendable in many ways, but it does not address utilitarian pragmatism that prizes protection over justice.


This is a translated and shortened version of "Evaluating America's Engagement in Iraq with Just-War Criteria" Public Justice Report, 28, 4th Quarter (Oct-Dec) 2005, 1-13.

The article is a painstaking analysis of the decision to go to war in Iraq, and its aftermath, and it is evaluated in terms of the Criteria of Justifiable Warfare - legitimate authority; just cause and last resort; right intention; proportionate means; reasonable expectation of success; noncombatant immunity and proportionate use of force in combat.

Serious questions are about America's standing across the globe.

The case can surely be made that through its pragmatic and utilitarian approach, has undermined America's much needed contribution to global stability and security.

384. It's Not A War That We Are Not Winning PJR, 3rd Qr (July-Sept).

https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/It's_Not_a_War_That_We_Are_Not_Winning.pdf

Since his book With or Against the World 2005 (See No. 347), Skillen has been regularly writing on matters related to war and military force. This article continues a PJR series that goes back at least to 2002 and his analysis of the legality of the invasion of Afghanistan, given the Taliban's support for Al Qaeda. In many ways this line of argument with respect to the US's international contribution developed in International Politics and the Demand for Global Justice (1981) and further expounded in the analysis of the American Security Strategy. In this "update" Skillen continues to highlight the fact that it is not a "war" that the US and its military allies are losing. It's rather a failure to establish good and sound governance. But despite pragmatic America's self-confidence that anything can be achieved under its auspices, so long as it is undertaken with the right approach, the predominant talk is about losing a war: It is not a war in the sense that America's military is fighting enemy military forces that threaten the United States and can be defeated by military means... We will not admit that ever since our military toppled the Taliban and Saddam Hussein we have failed to govern those countries adequately. In this situation and without a substantial policy reversal the American military is either helping to create a military dictatorship (ie by training the only national organization that will have the capability of ruling the nation) and if not then all the training is merely supplying factions with better equipped fighters to engage in wholesale civil war. The evidence piles up that this is merely an exercise in American self-interest (safeguarding access to gulf-state oil) which has used the war as a cover.

Skillen explores the myths and contradictions with the resultant confusion. Despite the superiority of American military might around the globe, the American ability to influence international events is on the decline, even as the non-military abilities of China, India, Russia and the European Union to exert considerable influence is on the rise.


The significant point of this brief introductory review of this book is found in Skillen's recognition that Hope in Troubled Times (2007) is an attempt by the authors to lead the reader through the weighing and measuring of all the technical details of the dominant global crises of our day - poverty, environmental degradation and terrorism - to see the various institutions and patterns of our human behaviour, so that we can rightly identify the way we have lived our lives according to the self-chosen goals of prosperity, national security, power and self-realization. The book seeks to offer pastoral guidance, a way by which we may be healed, showing us that these paths which we have taken need to be forsaken because they (the paths) are telling us we are walking on the road to hell having forsaken at a fundamental normative level the road to peace and lasting shalom. The authors are aware of how we can be entrapped in the collision of merciless ideologies and firmly believe that there is indeed good reason to hope.

386. Upholding Life *PJR*, 3rd Qr (July-Sept).

[https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/human_life](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/human_life)

This explanation of CPJ Guideline #6 follows in the wake of press debate that the ruling of the US Supreme Court which upheld a ban on partial-birth abortion was a "stunning assault upon women's health." Skillen briefly reviews the dissenting opinion of views Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg who claimed the decision "cannot be understood as anything other than an effort to chip away at a right ... [which is central] to women's lives." The PJR editor introduces CPJ's sixth Guideline on Human Life. There are 6 affirmations commented upon and it contrasts Government responsibility for the protection of the lives if its citizens as well as of the life-generating, life-sustaining institutions of marriage and family. It is a mistake the Guideline affirms to pit the unborn child against the pregnant mother's alleged autonomy. Absolute autonomy is a myth, a false and unobtainable ideal. Thus the Guidelines affirm the belief that marriage is a central part of the creator's design for the care and upbringing of children. The principled denial of autonomy and the recognition of the inter-dependent responsibility of humans for each other, particularly in relation to the procreation of children between a man and woman, gives a firm basis for governmental protection and support of women who have suffered rape and the Guidelines consider the proper and healthy patterns in which life should be affirmed and nurtured. The offer of an abortion should not be allowed under public law as an ordinary or standard means of family planning, or for the convenience of those responsible for the pregnancy. Abortion must be an act of Government and should only be required only under circumstances of unusual danger to the pregnant woman. The Government's role in upholding and affirming life is emphasized. A CPJ Guideline is available.

387. If It’s A Horse Race... *PJR*, 3rd Qr (July-Sept).

[https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/If_It's_a_Horse_Race,_Why_Not_More_Than_Two_Horses.pdf](https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/If_It's_a_Horse_Race,_Why_Not_More_Than_Two_Horses.pdf)

This is in the PJR department titled: Editor's Watch. If the presidential election is a horse race, why not include more than two horses? The Editor contends that a more substantive electoral process would stimulate debate and be positive in an electoral educational sense. This reiterates the suggestions contained in "Public Discourse and Electoral Representation", Chapter 10 of Recharging the American Experiment 1994 (No. 230) and also "Citizenship and Electoral Reform" Chapter 8 of In Pursuit of Justice 2004.
388. The New Atheists and Political God Talk Root and Branch 6, July 4.


Religion is "up" as a topic for conversation, the new atheists are making quite an impact upon the world with various books, publications, lectures and interviews, and in the meantime aspiring presidential candidates are going out of their way to speak about their religious roots in order to assure voters who take faith seriously that [they] identify with them and thus deserve their trust and their vote. Skillen makes some suggestions about how this political god talk relates to the new-style "atheists with attitude." The general view still is some way from recognizing the actual religious faith that dominates American politics. It is America, after all, that we and America's god celebrate. Serious public talk about the transcendent Creator of heaven and earth is appropriate at times, and those who recognise that God's mercy is at the foundation of the search for justice in political life, should seek out such opportunities. But that will also require a reform in the way such people of faith view their politics.


https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/984

This piece exposes the ongoing inner contradiction displayed in President Bush's rhetoric about the Iraq war. The historical argument goes like this: America liberated Iraq from Saddam Hussein; sovereignty was returned to the Iraqi people; sectarian violence increased and America's current task is to assist Iraqis in bringing security to their people.

The major critics of the president are simply suggesting that he botched the job and the time has come to leave. The view on both sides is delusional. Setting dates for an American military withdrawal while blaming the nearly powerless Iraqi government for not climbing out fast enough from the hole we dug for it is as immoral as continuing on the present course. America made a monumental error and it is proving extremely difficult for the Bush administration to face up to that.

390. Lilla Misses God Root and Branch 7, September 3.


This is a piece that comments upon Mark Lila's book The Stillborn God, Politics and the Modern West. As part of the Root and Branch series it is designed to encouraged readers to knowledgably enter into the ongoing public debate about religion and politics. Skillen explores Lila's modernist faith, following Hobbes, that our speech about God is really only about our own experience. Lilla affirms the priority of human autonomy over the requirements of liberal democracy. His naïve belief is that the modern road leads to democracy without the need of God. Skillen's critique comes from Lilla's commitment to human autonomy. If humans have created God then how is it that such a action is not worthy of human autonomy? Moreover, Lilla tries to place Hobbes over against all messianic movements, when in fact he remains blind to the messianic consequences of Hobbes views. The anti-humanistic messianisms of Hitler and Marx were counter-Christian movements not extensions of biblical religion.


https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/979

This is a discussion about the value of just markets and the free exchange that they can promote. It is written just after the exposé of the sub-prime interest rate crisis in the US and the advice of an IMF warning about protracted instability and the need for governments to respond wisely. The broadsheet discusses the
role of Government in economic relationships. Too often, talk of free-market
economics pits the freedom of businesses and consumers over against
government regulation/ Conservatives want freedom from overbearing
government regulations; liberals want governments to act more vigorously to
protect consumers and the poor from the ravages of the free market. But this
way of posing a divide leads to a misunderstanding of what makes healthy
markets possible. The broadsheet simply reiterates the factual role of
government in the market as a public realm.

392. Darfur Tragedy & A Medical Educator’s View Of Africa PJR, 4th Qr (Oct-Dec).

https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/
The_Darfur_Tragedy_and_a_Medical_Educator's_View_of_Africa.pdf

This is an update on the the continuing crisis in Darfur, Sudan, and draws upon
Skillen’s interview with Dr. Glenn Geelhoed, a surgeon and medical educator at
George Washington University.

Geelhoed regularly takes medical students to countries in Africa so that his
students can learn through confrontation with a reality they know nothing about
in order that they might learn how people cope and survive in a culture and an
environment devoid of the technologies and "stuff" that American medical
students take for granted.

This is a confronting report, one that reminds readers of the horrendously
difficult circumstances faced by so many of the world's population. The emphasis
is upon learning from the people "on the ground", rather than magnanimously
assuming some superior insight because one comes from "outside".

393. Security And Defense: Guideline #7 PJR, 4th Qr (Oct-Dec).

https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/security_and_defense

This is the eighth of the Center's Guidelines for Government and Citizenship on
security and defense. The article expounds 7 affirmations which entail the
Government's responsibility to protect the political community, the place of police
and courts, the nature of military power, the necessity of both police and military
to enact their respective responsibilities in just and lawful ways. Government
may use lethal force only for just cause as a last resort and when the success of
such retributive action appears probable. Noncombatants must immune from
police and defense force.

The shrinking globe is characterized, more and more, by increasing numbers of
alliances and organisations which aim to settle disputes without recourse to
military action. Finally the list affirms that the United States, currently the
world's dominant military power, should take the lead in helping to strengthen
international law and institutions. This is what it is called to do for its own
security as well as for general security around the world.


This is in the PJR department titled: Editor's Watch. Skillen provides a brief
overview of the issues of concern to American voters in the year before the
Presidential election. It is actually a carefully framed statement which aims to
respect the character of public participation in elections and the responsibility of
citizens to cast an informed vote. America's political system allows too much
distance between running for office and the process of governing.

Is it not the American voter's negative view of government, which then is what
the candidates pander to in various ways? The article outlines the aim of the CPJ
to hold serious conversations about political life around the country.
395. Education in Ontario Root and Branch 8, Oct 5.
This review of the pending Ontario election contrasts the education funding policies of the Liberals, who want to maintain the status quo, and John Tory of the Conservatives who is advocating a more pluralist approach to public education. There is also discussion of the secularist majoritarian views of John Stackhouse who believes that religious education is necessarily private and that schooling is a State prerogative. Skillen points out the irony: the conservative, is the genuine progressive with regards to just educational funding policies.

396. The Annapolis Conference Capital Commentary, Nov. 9.
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/976
At the Annapolis Summit Israel's PM Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmood Abbas pledged to go all out for a final peace deal before the end of 2008. This is a discussion of the prospects of the conference some weeks before it took place. It is a complex, protracted and deeply frustrating process that reaches back decades. Even assuming that Olmert and Abbas can negotiate a two-state accord, could they get anyone to follow them? Olmert's government could easily fall if Israelis thought he gave away the store. Abbas, even with help from the Quartet, might be unable to compel Hamas to fall into line. And would Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, go along.

(Unavailable online) So what does the term "Christian Democracy" mean? What kind of politics does it refer to? Skillen outlines the ongoing resistance which advocates of such an approach will face. But the question is about the relationship of any set of deep convictions people may hold to political life. The question is whether Christianity, from its deepest roots, drives toward public justice for all citizens, including equal, public-legal treatment for people of all faiths. Skillen gives an overview, in two paragraphs, of a biblically-directed understanding of "Christian democracy". It should not be an oxymoron, he says. A Christian-democratic approach to politics and government should carry a banner that says, "We will never claim that our deeds or policy proposals are god's will, but only that they represent our humble human effort to respond to God's call to do justice."

Dr. Skillen: Just a few comments. I am anxious to hear questions. I am quite in agreement with Mike McConnell and the general statement that he laid out. It seems to me that to prejudge how someone may speak is itself a judgment about who may participate as a citizen and who may not. But everyone who is a citizen should be free to participate in public debate without qualification. Also, I would say, if at many points where Professor Audi uses the terms "secular," "secular reasoning," or "secular reasons," he would instead speak of public-legal reasons or political reasoning, I would be quite sympathetic. That is to say, anyone who is speaking to matters of political or legal life should offer public-legal arguments from their religious or nonreligious point of view. It will not be
very helpful in political discussions for someone to say simply that God told them something, or that science has lately shown, or that their best friend thinks this or that. A speaker needs to argue, for example, that Congress or the courts should do something, and then, of course, what should follow is an argument for why that "something" will be just or sound for the common good.

2008.

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/972
This is a broadsheet that explains the way market-distortions that push up the price of food, that encourage the growth of carbon emissions to the disadvantage of farmers in poor countries result from foolish Government policies. The discussion begins with the increases in the price of food and the attempt to promote ethanol production. Actually, suggests Skillen - referring to Robert Samuelson in the Washington Post 12/12/07 - the supplementing of gasoline with ethanol may actually create a false sense of progress and increase rather than decrease oil dependency. In a bad year competition between food and ethanol producers could push prices even higher. The latest farm bill produces market distortions which will hinder the development of alternate fuels. Meanwhile support for American farmers makes it impossible for farmers in poor countries to compete on the American market.

400. Faith and the Presidency Root and Branch 10, January 16. (Public Justice Report concludes after 30 years; Presidential Primary Paradoxes Capital Commentary Feb 15)
This is a further discussion of the way religion is referred to in the (American) political realm. It covers developments over the last 50 years, including JFK's assurance that a Roman catholic presidency would not mean a church controlled White House. Skillen reviews Mitt Romney's confession of Christian faith in recent times.

    The religious affirmation in Romney's speech is quite thin, the values claim general, and the political relevance indirect and largely unhelpful.

Huckabee admits to wanting to amend the Constitution to insert standards that comply with God's law for marriage and the unborn. For the rest - Clinton, Obama, Edwards and McCain - the faith to which they appeal refers ultimately to faith in America and its promises. And Skillen's conclusion:

    What we have, then, in the campaign rhetoric is civil religion as ground for moral values and morality as ground for self-government.

But in all this the responsibilities that belong to government and other institutions, organizations and relationships are not clarified.


This article is Skillen's contribution to a republication of a previously published exchange with David Little's "Conscientious Individualism: A Christian Perspective on Ethical Pluralism" (No. 317) in Richard Madsen and Tracy B Strong (eds) The Many and the One: Religious and Secular Perspectives on Ethical Pluralism in the Modern World 2003. Skillen's 12 page article focuses upon Little's appeal to Roger Williams as justification for his approach (Skillen's other comments on Williams are at Nos. 164, 122 and 135). Skillen says that something more fundamental than Little's "conscientious individualism" is required, because
the individual conscience is not the ultimate seat of authority. The Creator and the Creator's moral law function as the authority and the normative standards for human beings. Biblically speaking, the commandments were not addressed to individual consciences but to persons in community, including those who held institutional authority as parents, priests, elders, judges, kings, and prophets.

The reply to Little begins with Skillen's alternative view of Williams' contribution.

What we might call Williams's strong affirmation of structural pluralism is on display in his distinction between church and state. At the same time, within each of those spheres he was not at all an ethical pluralist and certainly not an ethical relativist.


An interesting American interpretation of a lecture by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury suggesting that Muslim (shari’a) law be accommodated within the British legal system. On the one hand, the lecture supports freedom of association for diverse "religious communities" even if in a peculiarly English, or British, manner. On the other hand, the Archbishop's argument relates social pluralism to universal secular law. Skillen discerns equivocation in the proposal. He notes that "relating to something other" is not peculiar to Jews and Muslims. There is more to this than merely relating to the British legal system. Skillen notes that the Archbishop affirms freedom of association to avoid a clash of loyalties between state and culture. But can this be the reason for including legal recognition of sharia within the British legal system? British Christians (the "mainstream" of secular British society) also owe ultimate allegiance to God who transcends both the Crown and the Church of England. So is Williams suggesting disestablishment of the Church of England to allow it to become but one of many religious communities under the crown or pluralizing the Church in order that some elements of sharia be included within its established framework? Skillen's second set of observations they focus upon Williams' proposal to redefine the role of public law. Williams' concern is that minorities shouldn't be allowed to become "too isolated" in their cultural practices from the mainstream. ... The Archbishop's plea for a reconceived "social pluralism" is not putting the emphasis where it should be placed: if the public laws are not justly serving the actual population then they must be changed through the democratic transformation of the political community.


https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/broader-picture-better-politics/

But how can candidates assure American citizens that their leadership will be successful if they can't explain clearly the greatest challenges and opportunities now facing the country, and offer sound proposals for how government should address those challenges and seize those opportunities?

This is the point at which Christians, in their civic capacity, must dig deep, refuse to go along with the personality pageant, and work for something better.

404. Is the Economic Crisis a Moral Issue Capital Commentary April 11.

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/965

While the title of this broadsheet links economy and morality, the article begins with a discussion of diverse languages that refer to normative demands in the different social spheres. And so with discussion of the "credit crunch" or the "economic crisis" one cannot avoid questions of justice and injustice and, hence, the issues are inextricably moral. This then is a discussion of political morality, of tax policy, bank services, and how people are provided for in order to
pay daily costs. This is not just a consequence of some massive technical glitch which was unanticipated in the workings of some massive machine, the crisis is no innocent accident, A Financial Times article explores the gap between rich and poor and notes how the growth in pre-tax income from 1979-2005 was inordinately in favour of the rich (1.3% per year for poorest households, less than 1 per cent for middle income earners and over 200 percent for those in the top 1 per cent of household earnings). In 1979 the differential was 1:8:23; by 2005 1:21:70! The immorality is not just about the decisions of individuals and businesses; it is also a great deal of immoral injustice on the part of government.


The initial endnote indicates that this contribution depends in part on Skillen's 2003 article, "Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea: Herman Dooyeweerd's Political and Legal Thought" (see No.335 above.)

This is a slightly briefer and refined version of the original 62 page journal article. The footnotes have been reduced considerably. The article begins with a brief statement of the basic orientation of Dooyeweerd's contribution to scholarship. A brief account of Dooyeweerd's critical examination of the possibility of philosophical thought, is then immediately followed by an exposition of how Dooyeweerd's general transcendental-critical method explored the Dialectical Antinomy in Modern Liberalism (98-101). It comes down to an exploration of the liberal view of human freedom, as developed by Kant, and focused upon practical reason as the origin of moral obligation. If the rational self is autonomous while also obligated then at one and the same time the self is free from all law and is the law that constitutes its own freedom. The subsequent discussion explores how liberal ideology Medicare in the American polity...

... people cannot live in a complex differentiated society without authoritative government and civic obligations. The liberal ideology foments the illusion of autonomy with a corresponding weakening of governance.

Creation Order as Ground of Societal Pluralism (101-103) explores the way Dooyeweerd's pluralist social philosophy will approach the comprehensive study of social institutions and the social fabric of diverse responsibilities. This is a normative philosophy seeking to identify how the various institutions, organisations and relationships are in fact accountable for how they give expression to human responsibility Coram Deo.

Human Identity and Creation's Modalities (103-104) is a brief outline of how sphere sovereignty is maintained between social spheres in an inter-dependent social fabric.

The Differentiation and Integration of Human Society (106-106), the author expounds upon the way human society has emerged or developed through history. Humans are called to give shape to their callings in history. Some relationships are founded biotically (in marriage and family), whereas others are founded culturally or historically (a newspaper or a trade union). The discussion broaches the question of healthy social differentiation, which could not have come about without the differentiation of a public-legal order with its own normative identity qualified by the juridical modality (p. 106).

Toward a Just Pluralism explores the structural pluralism by which no one societal organisation or institution has the superintending authority over all the other social relationships. The differences between public and (two types of) private law are expounded. Internal private law refers to the rights of bodies to oversee their internal affairs.
Laws of the state cannot be just if they violate the internal authority and responsibility of the non-government spheres of life. Civil private law (common law) pertains to the realm in which individual freedom and equal treatment should be recognised and guaranteed by the state as a matter of right (p.108).

Here is "the juridical asylum of the human personality", counter-balancing any excessive communal demands within legal life. Skillen exposes why liberalism has got it wrong. Liberalism assumes that this is the original sphere of human autonomy, whereas this sphere cannot come into existence without the public legal power's protections against the over-stepping of public officials of their offices. The State that is responsive to its calling to ensure public justice is undermined by the absolutization of individual freedom or of the state. To conclude Skillen make a brief comparison between "sphere sovereignty" and the idea of a "subsidiary" relationship among associations and institutions. Dooyeweerd’s social theory is compared with that which tries to refer to public life in terms of a whole and its parts. This clarifies why from a Christian standpoint it make no sense to speak of the autonomy of non-state institutions within the state. Autonomy/subsidiarity refers to a whole and its parts. The **Conclusion** draws the state (or political community) as an institution through which humans are called to respond with creative, history-making stewardship.

406. **Political Speech and Action** *Root and Branch* 12, May 1

[https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/Political_Speech_and_Action.pdf](https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/Political_Speech_and_Action.pdf)

This addresses the common presumption that a common public reason should guide political debate. Skillen broaches two difficulties. The first difficulty is with the manner in which "religion" is defined as the opposite of "secular".

> Granting equal treatment to citizens of diverse faiths in our constitutional system does not set the political system apart from religious convictions; it just means that the political community is no longer constitutes as a community of faith.

It is simply not true that public reason is the only thing that people of diverse faiths have in common. People of similar faith may well disagree on public policy, and thus it is quite legitimate for voters to seek to have candidate give an account of how their approach to government is rooted in the faith that shapes their lives. The second difficulty is that the view too narrowly focuses upon the Constitutional protection of religious freedom as if this is merely a matter of recognizing an individual's conscientious beliefs. "Free exercise" is not merely about freedom to have whatever beliefs one has in private. It is also a matter of how a child's education is chosen by its parents; how social service providers serve those in need. Such protection of "free exercise" would lead to genuine pluralism. Citizenship is about membership in a political community in which citizens can freely participate from their diverse points of view. (see No.469)

407. **America and Israel** *Root and Branch* 13, June 2.

[https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/America_and_Israel.pdf](https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/America_and_Israel.pdf)

Religions, says the author, are ways of life, functioning like glasses in that they help us get things into focus. The article explores the American way of life as a religion. The US support for the state of Israel is expression of this way of life, this civil religious viewpoint. And it is in conflict, at a religiously deep level with other religions. Skillen explores the dismissal of Robert O'Malley from the Obama re-election team for his suggestion that Israel as much as the Palestinians were responsible for the failure of recent peace initiatives. A bizarre taboo is at work in US public life that means raise questions about Israel are never raised for fear of being denounced by powerful lobbies. But why are Jewish and Christian evangelical voters so pro-Israel. The author outlines the central thesis that will
become part of a book he is writing. The Christian Zionists, the American Jewish Zionist and America’s own new Israelite self-definition come together in a coalition of religious forces that has the power of an (almost) established civil religion. It is the religion of the American way of life that sustains both other conventional "religious" Zionism. For genuine public debate insight is needed about the religious character of the American way of life. (see No.24, No.441).


https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/961

Can torture be sanctioned by the President without abrogating the rule of law? Skillen notes:

Pragmatism in support of American safety supposedly justifies the exceptional means that appear necessary to the president to achieve that end.

The argument explains that the "enhanced interrogation techniques" do not make the US any safer .... Illegitimate methods to obtain information means that a court abiding by the rule of law will not proceed to prosecution. Principle above pragmatism is more and more a political need for the entire political community, for the US and for the world at large.

409. Does Our System Demand Too Much of the President? *Election Series '08* No 1 July 4 (Republished January 2012).

As President of the Center for Public Justice, Skillen introduces an "Election Series '08" for consideration among those who are following CPJ's policy development. This is the only time in the cycle of American elections that the people of the US come together in one election. In this election the entire political community is the electorate. This is the one and only public official elected by them. That is at the root of America’s too great demand upon its head of State.

The discussion draws on reflection from Larry Siedentop of Keble College, Oxford about the democratic deficit in the EC. This is seen in the French, Dutch and Irish rejection of the latest EC proposal. While governments are represented in Brussels, the citizens themselves are not integrated into the governance of the Union. It's not just economic benefits, but membership, and adequate representation that is missing. Skillen compares this with the American situation where political cynicism is also on the rise. The US also has a democratic deficit. Representation has become abstracted from the people who do the voting, if they vote. It is against this cynicism that Barack Obama has marshaled younger voters into a nation-wide movement for change. Siedentop misrepresents the situation in the US by comparing it favourably with the EC, but what is lacking is genuine civic education by political parties which have become little more than electoral machines. *Congress is even less democratic today than it was decades ago.* The common good of the national polity needs to be strengthened in a comprehensive way. Democratic renewal must bring about a new and enduring form of political accountability from those elected to govern.


This article includes the author's most recent attempt to build upon discussions in which he has sought to specify the particular concern of political science (see as examples No.10, No.18, No.22, No.27, No.44, No.48, No.64, No.65, No.127, No.155, No.229, No.376). The article's abstract for the conference reads:
The discipline of political science is still too much influenced by the ideal of finding a method that will do for politics what Newton did for physics (as one author puts it). The quest for a "hard" science of political behavior that focuses on "facts" separated from "values" generally controls much if not most of the discipline. In this century-long quest, the discipline has important assumptions and methods from sociology, psychology, mathematics, biology, economics, and other sciences in various attempts to achieve a cause-and-effect explanation of political behavior. This paper tries to expose the weakness and adequacy (sic!?) of these typically reductionist approaches to political science and outlines an approach that not only rejects modal reductionism but identifies the object of political science as the norm-responsive institutional community that is constitutes by government and citizens (or subjects). The political community (or "state" as it is referred to throughout much of the world) is a norm-responsive entity that cannot be properly understood from the prejudicial point of view of a fact/value dichotomy. Instead, it must be recognized as an historically dynamic institution that functions in all modalities of human experience (physical, biotic, psychical, social, linguistic, logical, economic, juridical, ethical, and more) and is distinguishable from other institutions and organizations, such as the family, church, school, and business corporation. Political science, therefore, must be an entity science that entails multi-modal normative analysis with full self-consciousness of its philosophical and religiously deep assumptions. [BCW NB the reference on p. 3 to sociology as a modal or aspectual science - whereas via the appropriation of Max Weber's historical economics there has been a strong tendency to view sociology as a science of an aspect of rational action, this influence has been modified by Durkheim's approach which is to view society in factual terms (and hence as a conglomerate of entities) via the analysis of its structural components.]

The paper is arranged with the following sections: an introduction examining the view of Jon R Bond and setting forth an alternative strategy in philosophical and historical terms (pp. 1-3).

**Distinguishing the Analyzable** is a brief discussion of what is involved in the scientific analysis of reality's modal aspects with a specification of the term political as

... *that which pertains to the life and operations of the state or political community* followed by an analysis of the 2007 Presidential address by Robert Axelrod to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (pp. 3-10); an attempt to answer the question

**What Should Constitute a Non-Reductionist Science of Politics** (pp. 10-16) in which the author shows that it is possible to present a workable alternative view of what the discipline should be. This is not just a statement offered "in dissent" but has the reformation of political science in view pointing to a starting point for the science that does not put faith in scientific method itself.

**411. World Language, Mutual Understanding** *Capital Commentary, July 19*
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/958

This is Skillen's reflections on multi-cultural global culture. He had been attending a conference in Madrid Spain and attended the famous Prado museum which was but a short distance from the train station where the terrorist bombing had been perpetrated three years previously. It is a descriptive essay about the importance of "diplomacy in many languages". Diplomacy must be developed at a highly sophisticated level to meet the challenges of a shrinking globe.

**412. The Fannie-Freddie Bail Out** *Capital Commentary, Aug. 1.*
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/957

How is the recent "Fannie-Freddie Bail Out" to be interpreted. It is a bill which enables the US Government to guarantee of the mortgage creditworthiness of
two GSEs - Government sponsored enterprises. Threatened with their collapse the Government had to act to the tune of $5 trillion. They had been kept viable by foreign investment but with a collapse in house prices and a withdrawal in investment capital they were threatened with bankruptcy. The broadsheet lays out in straightforward terms what has happened and how it is to be interpreted. Market and regulatory failures are now to be paid for through taxpayer's monies. The losses have been socialized. The public bails out the market's investors so that they will stay and keep the free market wheels turning. Skillen explains why adequate regulation of the market is needed to ensure that private investment failures are not paid for by taxpayers.

413. "Is A Science of Politics Possible?" The Global Spiral, Sept. 1.

This is a re-written version of the conference paper listed in No. 410. The material is arranged under different headings. After a substantial introduction, a critical representation of the views of Bond and Axelrod is presented, which concludes:

The proper object of study for political science, I would contend, can be nothing less than the institutional political community of government and citizens.

The material is then organised in different sections under the following two headings: What is the object of study? concluding

In sum, my starting assumption is that the "political" is not a universal function of all human affairs, the study of which can yield a reductionist, cause-and-effect explanation of human behavior.

and What Constitutes a Non-reductionist Science of Politics?

... politics must be an entity science, not first of all a modal or aspected science.

In Conclusion, Skillen writes

The aim of this paper has been to suggest that the reason for the failures and inadequacies of modern political science is that it has not adequately identified and distinguished the proper object of its study and that this inadequacy is due, in part, to the religiously deep assumptions about human nature and the nature of science with which much of its research begins. A different starting point with different assumptions about human nature, science, and political life is needed.

The implication is that a new view of science is needed and not just of political science.

414. Campaign Attention to "Religion" Root and Branch 14 Sept 2


The Presidential campaign has seen both Republicans and Democrats giving attention to the "religion factor". The views of Dean Gerson, speech-writer for President Bush, are examined. Gerson, an evangelical Christian, had written in the Washington Post offering advice to candidate Obama but does so ambiguously.

Gerson is among those who want a religious America, not a secularist America.

According to this view, the presidential campaign is about which candidate should be authorized to represent the true American faith and way of life. In analyzing the respective merits of McCain and Obama, Skillen interprets their campaigns are two options within the dominant civil religion. It is a question of whether the old fashioned civil religion, or a new expression of the dominant faith will prevail. Skillen predicts a McCain victory seems unlikely.
The interview lasts 19 minutes, covering many questions about the orientation of the Center for Public Justice. The discussion covers the long tradition of Christian attempts to control government, or of turning national political communities into communities of faith.

US civil religious nationalism views the US as God's means of leading the world forward and it is currently fired by a profound anxiety about America's No. 1 status in the world. Why is the US political system so caught up in civil religious fervour?

Skillen suggests that the way American's view politics, and the structure of America's system of political representation including the way the president is viewed, makes a major contribution to this.

The President represents the people's love of the nation which actually is also deeply suspicious of government itself. The election while presupposing that the US is God's chosen nation to lead the world, expects so much and yet continues to search for a small federal government. This civil religious anxiety fills the vacuum brought on by an absence of national political parties.

The discussion reviews the prospects of McCain and Obama in the forthcoming election. Skillen briefly comments on CPJ's policies - neither candidate comes close to agreeing with "most of what we are for."

The problematic structure of US governance is evident in the election but this is not raised as an issue by the candidates. Whoever is elected will have to negotiate the many tensions, complexities and ambiguities.

The root of the problem - the problem being: why have so many mortgage assets lost their value and become illiquid? - is a lack of trust.

Banks and investment firms had enticed people to take out mortgages not adequately backed by the value of the homes they were buying. Lending institutions and homebuyers were gambling that housing prices were on a perpetual climb.

Government policies encouraged individuals and companies to buy now and pay later. The trust was lacking to begin with; why should people put their trust in the government bail-out plans?

Trust will not be restored until real responsibility and genuine accountability are re-established at every point around the circle.


Skillen's 2003 Francis Schaeffer Lectures "Jesus and Caesar; Christian Faith and Political Process"
418. **McCain, Obama and America's Two Exodus Stories** *Election Series '08, No 8 Oct 15.*

Skillen continues the Election Series articles by giving a further account of how American civil religion manifests itself in contemporary political life. It is the backdrop against which most political debate in American makes sense.

The first story is that of the Puritans who, in covenant with God, took their exodus from oppression in Britain and set out to the new promised land.

The second story was authored by America's slaves - mostly in song.

Both exodus stories had distinctive views of America's system of governance, In the first story the federal government was to be a servant of the states, not the head of a national polity. In the second story a strong federal government led the fight against slavery and established equal civil rights for all citizens.

Skillen explains how McCain and Obama relate to America's dominant Exodus stories - McCain representing the Puritan errand into the wilderness, and Obama the aspiration for a new day when equal rights for all is realised.

The views of the candidates with respect to freedom and government are examined. In terms of national defense, for example, McCain approaches the military as the expression of the nation's love of freedom; for Obama it is one department of government.

Finally, the weaknesses of the two Exodus stories are canvassed. The first story runs off the tracks with American exceptionalism, while the second sees progress in more and more identity groups claiming their "rights". The author encourages readers to move beyond these stories when they consider how to vote and concentrate

...on the hard work of building a sustainable and trustworthy republic that can, with modesty and forethought, conduct the hard work of multidimensional diplomacy in a shrinking, warming, warring world.

419. **Guidelines for Voting** *Election Series '08, No 9 Oct. 29*

Here is a brief catalogue of CPJ’s "Guidelines for Voting". What is outlined here is a summary of CPJ's policy platform, and an analysis of how the candidates stand in relation to these various policy areas. 1. What is a political community? 2. What are the tasks of government in the political community? 3. What is the task of citizenship? 4. How should welfare policy be framed? Who "provides" welfare? How should welfare provision be regulated? 5. Education policy - does it promote justice for families, schools and equal treatment of all citizens? 6. How is human life protected at all stages? 7. Homosexuality - how do candidates define marriage? Is marriage a civil rights matter? 8. Security and defense. 9. Religious freedom. 10. The environment. 11. The family. The approaches of both major candidates in each of these policy areas is examined. Critical questions are raised concerning the administration of justice in relation to pressing problems.

420. **_____ and Amy Sherman with Rudy Carrasco** *Toward Civic Justice and Economic Empowerment*  Nov. 5.

This is the fruit of a nine-month collaborative effort in which the authors seek to provide guidance for biblical Christians to attend to their callings as creational stewards, as those who seek God's shalom for their cities. It is outlined in terms of a "two step" method of presentation - **Foundational Principles** - the way things ought to be; the way they are; the way of the King - and **Practical Applications** with **Eight Principles of Christian Economic Empowerment** to enable readers to begin to apply the principles and avoid politically correct and socially popular ways of economic life. These include 1.a high view of human dignity, potential, creativity, freedom, and responsibility; 2. recognizing our
identity as stewards to form genuine opportunities for resource management of up and coming generations; 3. affirming the amazing creational diversity and complexity of personal and social life; 4. affirming the important contributions of governments, individuals, families, and the associations of civil society for a healthy, prosperous society; 5. respecting entrepreneurial activity; 6. emphasizing a distinctive Christian approach to business; 7. affirm the role of government in economic matters; 8. acknowledging our Christian responsibility to protest against economic injustice.

421. The Obama Victory Capital Commentary Nov. 7
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/947

Obama's election confirms a process by which it has become more and more evident that this national political community demands national governance. His victory puts paid to the view of the American republic that allowed the structure of the republic to take care of itself. It cannot do that.

Skillen reviews the role of the federal government since Roosevelt's new Deal and Johnson's great society. Reagan and Bush represent concerted efforts to arrest the trend, or the speed, at which the United States has proceeded toward a national polity in which it is no longer merely a federally protected collection of State polities. Moreover the US is no longer able to set its own course in its own terms.

The US has moved beyond the governance advocated by Roosevelt and Johnson (Democrat) and Reagan and Bush (Republican) and now requires coherent and accountable national governance. This changing context also requires a very different foreign policy. Obama's victory however does not necessarily draw attention to the structural problem now presenting itself to the US - its Constitution militates against the kind of national governance the country now requires. The national polity of the US is "underserved" domestically and internationally by an out-of-date governing system. How can the structure of the republic be reformed over the long term?

422. The Question of National Governance Election Series '08, No. 10, Nov. 17

Skillen has taken the opportunity of the Obama election to enunciate his deepened appreciation for the federal integration of the US national polity. It is Skillen's response to the responses that were made to his Capital Commentary (No.421) where explained how America's political landscape has changed over 75 years.

Federal politics inadequately represents citizens of the national polity. This is seen in the outmoded system of representation in Congress in which members are not specifically held accountable for governing in the interests of the nation as a whole. There is but one office bearer elected by the national electorate. In this skewed system the central government is subject more and more to un-elected interest groups.

It hasn't always been the case that the US is characterized by a genuinely national polity, but it is now, he says, which raises the question of how Americans should view their constitution. He also implies that a polity that lacks valid representation and hence genuine accountability is in part a cause of the nation's economic woes, its ongoing inability to adequately face up to the need for just governance. He illustrates this by merely listing some of the ongoing endemic problems that seem to defy solution; the financial crisis; the lack of an adequately funded health-care system; issues of energy, transportation and environment; the degradation of national infrastructure; the disarray of social security; the inability of Congress to fund the federal governments operations.
All these issues that require sound legislative decisions by both houses of Congress and the president on behalf of the nation as a whole. Yet legislative battles over these issues increasingly lead nowhere because the congressional brokering process works primarily to try to satisfy competing state and regional interests and competing national interest groups.

If the governing philosophies that dominate the polity do not change there will be perpetual emergency reactions, where elected legislators and presidents seek to solve problems short-term in defiance of the political platform upon which they have stood in their election campaigns.

This is clearly an attempt by the soon to retire president of the Center for Public Justice to assist the members and supporters in their ongoing interpretation of political life as the presidency of Barack Obama unfolds and as long-term impacts of legislation are felt in society's diverse institutions. These must be recognised and upheld by government.

The responsibilities that belong to these (families, churches, businesses, universities, schools etc) are themselves the most important limits on the federal government's actions.

This is the view that the Center promotes, over against those who would put states' rights and individual rights as the primary means of structuring the Federal Government's mandate. And this recognition is by no means the same as the question of the different levels of government. In the US today there is confusion over the politicized role of the judiciary, which is relied upon to define matters that should rightly be defined by law makers. The Supreme Court is not a legislative body, says Skillen.

The US is caught in its own political system and at least part of the problem is the blurring that occurs to the difference between the art of campaigning and the art of governance.

A very important dimension is also in need of revival - and that is citizenship itself needs to be emancipated from passivity, on the one hand, and reliance upon interest groups on the other.

A new kind of nationwide citizens association is needed, he says.

423. The Left Wing of America’s Civil Religion Root and Branch 15, Dec. 3 Also at Washington Post.

This is an examination of the underlying "left-wing" appeal by Sally Quinn of the Washington Posts' "On Faith" column that President Obama should demonstrate symbolically that he will be an inclusive President by joining the Episcopal Cathedral parish when he comes to Washington.

This continues Skillen's examination of America's civil religion and this is identified by him as its "left wing". The inner weaknesses of the argument are exposed; the assumption of Ms Quinn is that to criticize inclusiveness is to reject the equal rights of all citizens. Quinn's article is an attempt to manoeuvre public discussion about the President's faith onto one side in a denominational dispute.

Skillen's reply brilliantly exposes the inner weakness of her inclusivist ideology by showing her support for a denominational mind that repeatedly aspires to change churches with their own religious beliefs into religious communities with the soul of the state.

He concludes by issuing a challenge to Quinn in relation to her "inclusiveness": What if President-elect Obama views the office of President as an office in the political community, and not as an office of America's civil religion? Will Quinn think less of the Obamas both as Christians and as the first family, if they decide not to join the Washington National Cathedral?
424. Entitlement *Capital Commentary* Dec. 19

[https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/947](https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/947)

This Christmas meditation looks at the financial crisis and economic recession in a context where Americans have gotten used to expecting their "entitlements". An exclusive and inordinate concentration upon securing my entitlements will misconstrue the overall situation, by concentrating solely upon the way the system's failures impact me. The system is revealed as broken and there is a grave injustice in the breaking of promises, the violation of trust, and our failure to provide to others what we owe to them.

Christmas reminds us that the coming of the Son of God who was entitled to everything and discounted his claim to everything. Disenfranchised himself of every divine privilege, and became a servant - one who owes everything and claims nothing. Only the entitlements that come from following Him endure forever.

The more we give ourselves to loving and doing justice to those who are also entitled to the love of God, the more we gain.

2009

425. Inauguration by Fire *Capital Commentary* Jan. 16.

[https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/945](https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/945)

Skillen reflects upon three tensions that will test the leadership of the new president.

The first is created by the opposing forces of a crisis in confidence that has gripped the country about America's ability to solve its problems, on the one hand and the ongoing pressure to take immediate action to show that something is being done to address these issues, on the other.

The second tension deals with America's traditional belief that hard work and self-confidence can get the job done. But are the problems getting too large and too complex?

The third tension is about the way a president should communicate to the public. How is optimism to be balanced with a frank assessment of how difficult things are at home and how limited America's impact can be abroad?

The truth must be told and responsible government must be encouraged.

426. Colson on Prayer, Church, and America *Root and Branch* 16 Jan 19

[https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/Colson_on_Prayer,_Church,_and_America.pdf](https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/Colson_on_Prayer,_Church,_and_America.pdf)

This is a respectful, albeit hard-hitting exposé of Chuck Colson's attempt to maintain his Christian faith while holding on to a remnant of his belief in American exceptionalism.

It is an examination of the world-view inherent in Colson's December 20, 2008 Breakpoint radio commentary.

The problem with Colson's discussion, Skillen says, is that the church he is thinking about is composed of Americans who have turned away from consumerism.

It is as if Christianity has failed if God's mercy is not transmitted to the world via the thrifty, hard-working American Christian church goers. The church in Colson's view becomes a means to the end of fulfilling God's special plan for America.

In praying for the church Colson should think of it not as a mean to America's end but as God's truly chosen people - Israel fulfilled through the in-grafting of believers from every nation into Christ (Rom. 11:13-24).

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How is trust to be restored/ the question is posed smack bang in the middle of the efforts of governments to tackle the financial crisis by an injection of trillions of dollars into banks and investment companies that have all but nationalized institutions which were thought to be "flagships" of government support for a free market. The separation of commercial and investment banking that came with the abolition of the Glass-Steagall Act has meant that large sums of money have come into the hands of greedy men that should never have come their way. The Federal Reserve now resembles a public hedge fund leverages at more than 50:1 (Niall Ferguson). What about bolstering supervisory standards in the institutions that led us into this disaster? Bad laws, faulty regulatory systems, negligent oversight and errant patterns of finance and governance need to be exposed before they can be corrected. Can the new president regularly report on his contribution to overcoming this crisis, in a way thatconcertedly and frankly builds trust in order to begin the work of overcoming these systemic failures? Skillen suggests that President Obama should grasp this problem and realise that the restoration of trust is a top priority that will require frank and open disclosure of what the government is seeking to do to avert disaster with a regular, even monthly, report to the nation.


https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/941

This is a description of the state of play between the President and Congress. The Republicans in Congress are in denial and simply adopt an opposition mode; the Democrat leadership are trying to grab the spoils, the control of the public's debit card. The American way of doing politics is somehow revealed as a disconnect between what elected office bearers are willing to do now and what they say they intend to do later on. The Washington DC experiment in federal funds for a voucher programme to enable 1700 poor students to attend non-government schools was unable to receive the promised grants in the bill Obama signed into law. Skillen's judgement is terse; signing the bills exemplifies the kind of leadership he is choosing to exercise today, and actions speak louder than promises. This is old politics.


This is a discussion of the contribution of Calvin and Calvinism in this 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth. Yes Calvinism has made an indispensable contribution to the strong and enduring culture of institutional diversity in western society and beyond. There is a comprehensive footnote giving recent publications that provide insight into the Calvinist contribution. Skillen's concern is to direct attention to the tendency found among many Calvinist streams and offshoots to identify one or other modern state as a "new Israel", and this, of course finds its way into the US self-definition in 1776.

Similar or related views can be seen in the Calvinists of Scotland, England, The Netherlands and among the Afrikaners. Skillen's concern is that the Reformed tradition should have long since recognized that "Christian" nationalism is a patently unbiblical idea.

The government's task is the doing of justice in humility and fear before God and in so far as the Reformed tradition has promoted this view of government it has done right. There's no biblical basis for promoting any one government to act out of nationalistic or messianic motivation.
This is a discussion of the situation in which 1 out of 10 Americans are reliant on food stamps for their daily food. Sure, a wealthy country like the US can look after its hungry, but the numbers are considerable, and worrying. But then the world problem is worse than that. Something like 20% of the world’s population, at least, are chronically malnourished.

The discussion of hunger leads into a broader analysis of the widespread feeling of injustice that circles the globe. The debt-for-equity demands for bailing out car producers, contrasts with the fact that such a requirement was not needed when the US government bailed out the banks and financial institutions. The widespread sense of economic injustice and the approval of political leaders won’t last long if such concerns are not met in concrete ways.

This is a contribution to a book detailing different perspectives of different Christian traditions upon international politics. It begins with discussion of The Reformed Tradition and some standard scholarly views about Calvinism, from Max Weber and W Fred Graham. The essay notes that the ideas of sin and predestination constitute the stereotypical view of “Calvinism” and asks:

Is there anything more to it than that? And what about John Calvin himself? Most important for our purposes, what if anything has the Reformed tradition contributed to government and politics, and particularly to international relations and foreign policy?

The “reformed” wing of the protestant reformation, identified with Calvin and Calvinism, is described. Calvin and the early Calvinists were not revolutionaries. They were not seeking to start something new. This approach has a world-wide spread, also in notable centres of learning. But it has also become identified with the doctrines of total depravity and double predestination which gives a lop-sided picture of its actual influence with an overly dogmatic theological tendency. Later in the essay under States and International Relations Skillen makes this clarifying comment:

The simplicity and unity of God’s creational purposes fall from view, however, if one assumes that reality is constituted most fundamentally by a dualism between this creation and another world, or between the damned and the saved, or between Christian nations vs non-Christian nations.

The emphasis is upon God’s one creation and the gospel, as the revelation that in Christ God will indeed bring creation to fulfillment so that His sovereign purposes reach their Sabbatical rest! God keeps His promises.

The essay is densely argued. In one place it notes similarities between Calvin and the Anabaptists in contrast to Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Both added “godly discipline” to the list of marks of the true church. Calvin differed from the Anabaptists with respect to the role of the magistrate - the political community is subject to Christ Jesus in Calvin’s view in contrast to “government outside the perfection of Christ” in the Schleitheim confession of 1527. Luther and Calvin also disagreed strongly over how government’s responsibility is to be understood. In Theological Distinctives, Calvin’s comprehensive view of “Creation, Fall, Redemption” is outlined, and Skillen concludes by suggesting that in contrast with Luther and the Anabaptists, Calvin was, indeed, a social reformer.
He wanted men and women in society to mirror God again, and that would require the ongoing reformation of every sphere of life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The next section “Church and State” is an important discussion of Calvinism's endorsement of societal differentiation and in the terms of Abraham Kuyper, of “sphere sovereignty”. This section starts with an interesting and provocative sentence:

Most Christians today, we can probably say, are Anabaptists in the sense that they contend for free churches in open societies with governments that give equal treatment to all citizens regardless of their faith.

Calvin had assumed that the state should enforce true religion. So how are Calvinists, Christians in the reformed tradition, to take their stand over against Calvin? Hence the semper reformanda implied in the essay’s title. Kuyper’s unconditional disapproval of the burning of Servetus is noted. But the reformed Christians, in reaction to church control of the state have too often allowed their religion to be privatized as a civil religion has dominated the public square. The essay discusses the problem of “secular” politics - Kuyper advocated secularization when that meant de-ecclesiasticization, but resisted secularization if by that term was meant the religious neutrality of political life. Calvin's notion of the Old Covenant fulfilled in the New Covenant takes the bible of both testaments as a whole. But there has been a negative consequence in Calvin’s view of the “covenant community” and that is found in the idea that grew up when new nations were being established whereby a “new Israelite” imagination developed. The New England Puritans, Knox in Scotland and the Afrikaners in South Africa have all been imbued with this notion. It has found a secularised form in the United States with “exceptional nation” of Woodrow Wilson and his latter-day disciple George W Bush.

Government Due to Sin?” is the next theological distinctive to be discussed. Though Calvinists are usually closer to Augustine than to Aquinas, there is a minority stream within Calvinism that sees the government of the political community based in God’s purposes in creation and thus come closer to Aquinas who argued that humans are political by nature. Skillen develops this view by reference to the flow of biblical revelation from Genesis to Revelation.

To be sure, if it had not been for sin there would be no need for the retributive functions of government, just as there would be no need for parental punishment of children.

And then, in relation to the stereotypes of Calvinist obsession with predestination, Skillen observes that the development of the political community should be understood in terms of the development of a facet of our creatureliness, our being fashioned in the image of God.

If the reader will grant this hypothesis, at least for the sake of argument, then the meaning of God's sovereignty comes into view not first of all as an overwhelming power to predestine some sinners to heaven and some to hell. Rather God’s sovereignty comes into view as the origin of human creatures, made in the image of God and called to love and serve God with everything we are and have, including our stewardship of the political community for the good of our fellow creatures.

There follows “Christianity and Civil Religion” a discussion of how such an understanding of biblical religion puts it on a spiritual collision course with the civil religion that dominates American self-identity, the idolatrous nostrum that the US is God’s new lead nation in history.

**States and International Relations** explains that the normative demand of public justice for our political communities throws any alleged “end of history” brought in by the world-wide acceptance of the liberal state, as a
misunderstanding of the historical and cultural task to which humans are called. Nations stand in need of Christ’s reconciliation.

**Warfare and International Politics** reaffirms reformed commitment to just-war criteria by which Governments discipline themselves and their peoples for their own defense. Just-war criteria are as good a point of departure for thinking about strengthening and renewing healthy international relations.

In **Conclusion** Skillen reiterates the importance of a biblical basis for just governance, and the just use of force, in the face of a very serious international situation. Today it is widely assumed around the globe that governments [should] act aggressively out of a nationalistic, messianic, or totalitarian motivation to try to force the world into the shape they wish it to have. Justice in humility and fear before God is the exact opposite of this. Governments, all governments, of large and small nations, need to learn to act co-operatively to uphold laws of distributive justice for the positive good of the commons - both the domestic commons within individual countries and the international commons of the world.


In his introductory chapter, Skillen writes:

> Our purpose, as authors, is to try to illuminate the global landscape and to provoke debate and critical reflection in classrooms and living rooms. Americans are go-getters, problem-solvers, forward-looking achievers. We want to get things done and make progress. We don't like barriers that stand in our way. We have a difficult time understanding those who don't share this approach to life. But what if the American way of life is sagging with doubts and hampered by growing weaknesses rather than gathering steam with one success after another? If, to some degree, whether great or small, doubts and weaknesses are growing, then critical reflection on global changes and on the foundations of American life is called for—and perhaps urgently so. . . . Where will all of this take us? No one knows. The optimists point to all the achievements of globalization that are lifting millions of people out of poverty and are pushing countries toward greater cooperation to achieve their mutual and combined interests. Pessimists point to the growing tensions among peoples and nations over food, fuel, and water, and over control of the direction that global shrinkage should take. More wars and conflicts rather than fewer may be the result. . . . As Christians we are particularly concerned to gain a deeper understanding of how people throughout the world—all created in the image of God—can deal with their responsibilities for, and their distrust of, one another. Rejecting all utopian illusions about the triumph of human goodness, contradicted as those illusions are by human selfishness, crimes, and hatreds, we also refuse to ignore the constant evidence of God's mercy and grace toward humans throughout all generations, a sustain mercy and restraining grace that make possible forgiveness, renewal, cooperation, and the continuing search for ways to resolve conflict and to build patterns and institutions of greater justice and stability.

In this exchange Skillen takes on the radical libertarian, who seeks to re-connect the evangelical community to that Republican interpretation of the American story, that views the US as a Christian society with a small and non-interfering federal government. "At this event, Marvin Olasky will discuss the false dichotomy between freedom and justice and offer his ideas on reconciling these aims." Olasky's summary of his presentation begins:

What is the best way to help Americans in need? How we approach this question cuts to our core beliefs about how society should be rightly ordered. For some, the free market is the most natural tool to use in the fight against poverty because it fosters innovation and prosperity while providing equal opportunity to all citizens. Others argue that social justice is best achieved through economic redistribution, in which a benevolent, centralized government levels the playing field and ensures equal results for all citizens. If the free market is the most efficient way to deliver goods and services across the American economy, does the risk of economic inequality make it unjust? If the idealism of social justice stifles economic growth through policies designed to ensure similar outcomes for all, does it take mobility and opportunity from the very people it is trying to save? Society often portrays mercy and equality as goals that conflict with innovation and efficiency. But is it true that free markets are incompatible with social justice?

The presentation, with jokes and cynicism, feeds a blurring of political complexity by simply appealing to some notion of "small government" as a timeless normative principle. Skillen's response is to avoid the cynicism and to try to demonstrate that it is possible to discuss political responsibility without getting lost in idealistic utopias. His approach is to highlight the evident complexities in America's political reality which Olasky's approach reduces to problems concerning large government.

This is a call of a "Christian patriot" to indeed be thankful to the Lord God for the good things the US has been able to do since the day the colonists declared their independence from Great Britain. A federal republic which initially intended to not maintain a standing army, also experimented in a new style of representative government.

The US has survived its own Civil War until today it the world's chief hyper-power. Nevertheless Skillen advises his readers to reflect upon the fact that the US has had to achieve much more than its original constitution had envisaged, even if it is now on the brink of bankruptcy as the world's largest debtor nation.

There are many problems that the US has to overcome on the path to being a genuine promoter of public justice, not only abroad but also most markedly at home. The American poity stands in need of a radical revision of its own independence.

In this broadsheet Skillen reflects on the startling and troubling facts of the decayed and decaying situation in the prison system of the US. One out of 31 Americans - a staggering 7.3 million - are either behind bars, on probation, or on parole, and in all likelihood they carry the scars of added trauma from the abuse suffered while incarcerated. The issue has been pushed to the front of Congressional consideration by a first time Senator.
Christians should be pleading for God's forgiveness for our complicity in a criminal justice system that perpetrates and perpetuates so much injustice. And genuine repentance means turning around to do what is right. Some trenchant responses by readers were posted.


This is a reworking of material that Skillen has been working on for many decades concerning the distinctive structure of the American polity and how it is predominantly shaped by a civil-religious vision of America's own exceptional place in history. In his 1993 essay (No.224), “Toward a Contemporary Christian Democratic Politics in the United States”, Skillen had observed:

What we find in much of the early political history of the United States is a witness to something that stands at odds with the quest for limitless power and freedom that motivates so many people today (88).

This he had further developed in “Forgotten Depths” (pp.11-21 in No.347) In that earlier essay he outlines an approach to the study of America’s political history that would explain why any "Christian democratic" aspirations of its earliest years as Puritan colonies were subsequently eclipsed. In his more recent publication, Skillen has explored why America seems to adopt an ambiguous posture with respect to the international order. And this a further refinement of the argument of Chapter 2 of that book, by comparing Islam and the USA. It may appear strange to compare a world religion that dates from the 7th century with the United States of America which is not yet 250 years old. But, Skillen argues, by doing so, the contrasting visions of world history can be clarified, their similarities and differences specified.

The peculiarity of America’s civil-religious mission to make the world safe for democracy can now be compared ... with Islam's mission. And that comparison can be enhanced by comparing both to the Soviet communist mission. The comparable factor that can be found in Islam, the USA, and Soviet communism is the conviction that history is moving toward the fulfillment of a universal human destiny and the primary historical force authorized to lead the world to that destiny is a specially chosen vehicle (Islam, the USA, or the communist proletariat), which must overcome diametric opposition in order to fulfill its mission.

After briefly introducing the topic, the discussion is organised under the following headings:

The Dar-Islam and the Dar al-Harb - Islam is committed to a view that the end of goal of history is the whole world's submission to Allah;

Western Christianity and the Rise of Enlightenment Secularism - a discussion of the historical inheritance within which the USA has developed its vision of itself to be both the leading example and the vanguard of freedom and self-government for the whole world;

The Third Rome - an excursus into the way in which Soviet communism - the major threat to the US vision in the twentieth century - was a secularised version of the Caesaropapist leadership of Ivan IV from 1547 who believed it was the Russian imperialist mission to complete Christ's rule over the earth;

The USA: Making the World Safe for Democracy; Contrasting Soviet Communism, Islam and the USA;
and a Conclusion which seeks to identify the differing visions of Islam and the USA, and to give an explanation of the reason they both anticipate conflict with each other in the decades ahead.

The chapter Concludes with a series of questions about the future shape of global society. American civil-religious nationalism and Islam (traditional and radical) are among the most vibrant, history-shaping movements in the world today. They need to be examined carefully and scrupulously by Christians who should become more involved in taking their discipleship seriously in all dimensions of their lives.

437. "Crunch Time: American Idealism, the Economy, and Afghanistan" Root and Branch 20 Sept. 2.

https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/Crunch_Time_American_Idealism,_the_Economy,_and_Afghanistan.pdf

Skillen takes the three elements - the religious faith directing the 'American way of life', the serious problems of economic management and public fiscal rectitude, as well as waning public confidence concerning the war in Afghanistan - and explains the "deeper questions of this summer". As with his previous broadsheets over many decades, this is formulated to commend a "stronger, shared vision of what a just republic should be in this shrinking world... sustainable prosperity will require hard work, durable savings, and stewardly investments in place of debt-induced consumption, unending warfare, and limitless grasping for the fulfillment of life's meaning in this age."


https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/925

In this commentary on the efforts of the president and congressional leaders to broker a health-care deal, Skillen writes his own first "post-presidential" contribution for CPJ. He now signs himself as "Senior Fellow", continuing to focus CPJ's ongoing work in policy research. In the background of this analysis is Skillen's critical appraisal of the US system of "interest group brokerage" as the preferred path of "do what will work" governance. The critical point is summed up in the following terms:

Today in Washington we are witnessing a political process so weighed down by decades of bits-and-pieces pragmatism (Medicare and drug benefits for seniors; Medicaid for the poor; state-governed insurance companies; tax-free health benefits for employees in some companies; free-market this and government-run that) that continuing along the line of pragmatic incrementalism is no longer practical.... But what they finally come up with will almost certainly not constitute a coherent, long-term answer.

The final paragraphs are an annotated listing of important books and articles that can assist US readers understand why a break with the political tradition of "pragmatism as usual" is an initial step to face up to health-care reality.


Skillen's article in the lead "Discussion Article" in this edition of Edification which features a "Dialogue on Christian Psychology". The abstract for the article reads:

Increasingly, the psychological profession recognizes the diversity of perspectives on, and approaches to, counseling and the study of psychology. This essay supports the legitimacy of distinctively Christian approaches in this field. This is not to suggest that nothing is common among all
approaches, but that what is common in diagnosis, scientific assessments, and accountability standards are often contended from different perspectives. At the same time, psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors with distinctive points of view must carry out their work in a public governance and accreditation context. That context is also regularly in contention, and its rules and laws are made by professional organizations and public officials who operate from different points of view on what is good and just for the public. Christians in the academic and professional field of psychology should not assume that the common terrain of science and public governance is "secular" (and neutral) and that their Christian viewpoint is only of private "religious" significance. Rather, they should contend for the equal treatment, in their profession and under public law, of diverse approaches in the field, including their own: in other words, genuine pluralism. They should also work openly and cooperatively from their distinctive viewpoint to help shape the laws and rules that will govern everyone in the profession.

Skillen begins his discussion by commenting on the views contained by an Oxford University professor, Tom Burns Psychiatry: A very Short Introduction (2006). It is debatable, says Burns, whether an entirely 'atheoretical' diagnostic system is possible. But then in California these days there are more people with psychotic diagnoses in prison than in mental hospitals. Important questions for practitioners are raised about the public demeanor of the counselling professions. The discussion proceeds with a discussion of Freedom for Diversity in Counselling and research. This is followed by a section, Pluralism in Support of the Public Commons. Some Implications for Psychological Services are then spelled out. Skillen concludes with the following statement:

You as professionals in the arena of psychological services, teaching, and research have some particular gifts and insights that should have an important influence in shaping what will be the all-or-nothing public laws of the land, the up-or-down rules that will govern your professions. If you do not exercise that responsibility in various individual and associational ways as part of your contribution to the Christian enrichment of citizenship, then you will, in essence, be choosing to concentrate only on your private responsibility, leaving the responsibility of shaping life in the public square in the hands of others. That, I contend, we must not do.

There is a good array of respondents. The contribution of van Leeuwen is of particular note in that it outlines the response of the Psychology Department at Eastern University to the kinds of public and political issues that face the profession and which Skillen has outlined. Skillen also replies to these extensive responses with a four-and-a-half page "Genuine Public Pluralism and the Establishment of Justice" (pp. 34-38). He stresses the importance of due respect to all vocations, explaining why he has used the example of Chaplaincy in the military as one example of the way government forms its contribution to cooperate with the religious diversity at work in the public domain.

2010

440. “Continuity and Discontinuity in the New Year” Capital Commentary January

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/919

This is a brief overview of the political situation that confronts the US - and the world - at the beginning of a new year. The broadsheet is one which echoes with relevance for the ongoing work of the Center. The purpose of the article is to face up to the widespread cynicism and despair that grips politics at home and abroad. And the message is a simply and straightforward one. Political activity, like anything else we do, makes sense as a humble thank-offering to God. We will slip into despair and cynicism if we think we can save ourselves by our own efforts. Christian politics is first and foremost, looking ahead with great anticipation to God's fulfillment of creation and making all things new.
A materialist disdain toward religion has led so many political scientists and those involved in foreign policy and international relations to seriously misread actually forces shaping American foreign policy. Nations throughout the world now take it for granted that the USA continues to offer unwavering and heavily funded support for Israel even when such support is contrart to United States own national interests. Skillen expounds three seemingly incongrous and intermeshing forms of modern Zionism. 1. America’s originating vision as God’s new Israel; 2. Jewish Zionism; 3. Christian Zionism.

Skillen’s contribution to this book, a collection of responses to the initiative of Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, that the question of incorporating elements of Shari’a law into the British legal system should be seriously considered. Writes Skillen, “The question is whether ... Shari’a can be conceived as a system that allows for and encourages the differentiation of responsibilities into sphere of independence from the scholars and judges who have traditionally ruled on everything within the umma.”

This would also seem to be a question as to whether British law in its evolution could conceivably contribution to developments in Shari’a jurisprudence across the Islamic world. Can British Muslims develop shari’a in a pluralistic direction (structural and confessional) within the context of British society and be considered as genuine participants in the Muslim umma?

Will it be possible for Islam to “pluralise” or will that incorporation into democratic societies, where faith is privatized, mean the end of Islam as a public faith? Does Islam have within it the resources by which the judgments of the scholars and the judges can be limited to tell the adherents of the religion what their religion requires and leave it up to Allah to convict those who do not submit?

The abstract for this article reads: “Largely missing from the liberal tradition’s economic and political doctrines is an idea of the political community in its own right with its own purpose. Liberal government is a reflex of free persons rather than an office of responsibility in a political community recognised to be original to human identity as life, property and economic enterprising.

This article argues that the flourishing of entrepreneurial responsibilities requires a political community constituted, first of all, to guard the public trust and the commonwealth and to protect a wide range of human responsibilities. Only in such a framework can the limits of government be properly defined so that nonpolitical responsibilities are able to flourish in a stable and just public legal order The argument for a “responsibilities economy”, upheld by a just political community, concludes with illustrative reference to family life, schooling and business/finance.
445. "How to do justice to diverse identities in the Middle East" The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 8:3 13 Aug.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is characterized by asymmetries in power and resources. The best option for justice is the emergence of two neighboring states that cooperate in dealing equitably with their diverse citizens. Whatever was believed about the long-term prospects of a Jewish state in Palestine after the Holocaust and World War II, it is evident 60 years later that stable, secure and just governance in that region is far from having been realized and may be more in doubt now than then. Still open are these questions: How likely is the survival of the Western, democratic state of Israel in a region that has not had much experience with that form of government? How should the most significant diversities in that region (ethnic, religious, cultural) be governed to achieve stability, security, and justice for all? Are we closer to or farther from such a goal today than in 1948?

446. "Semper Reformanda in All of Life" Pro Rege Sept., 16-25.

"Semper reformanda requires more than talk; contending for right doctrine is insufficient; preaching and catechesis are not the goal of Christian discipleship; the nurturing of a Reformational worldview is only one ingredient of Christian discipleship. Christianity is a way of life and not only a way of worship and doing theology."

Skillen’s aim in this article is to say something about political life, given the Calvinist and more recent Kuyperian inheritance.

The essay begins with “Kuyperian Calvinism Today” and this is an attempt to interpret Kuyper’s contribution to encourage the formation of Christian organisations. He then moves on to “Calvinism and American Civil Religion” to then explain his view of “Two Exodus Stories” and with a “Closing Admonition” that appeals for Christian political effort in dialogue, debate, confrontation and cooperation with fellow citizens of other faiths.

447. "Constituting a Political Community" Capital Commentary Oct. 22 (this is a reprint of what was previously published in Public Justice Report as "Guidelines for Government and Citizenship").

https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/881

The Guideline asserts that political communities exist because "God created us with this capacity." Political community is possible because God created human beings to be political creatures.

"The mutual obligation of citizens and public officials exhibits a covenantal character, pointing us to the accountability of government and citizens to God." God made humans for communities of public justice; therefore, as citizens we are obligated from the start to see that our political order is one that does justice to all. Just as humans were created for family life and education, for working together and building organizations of all kinds, so, too, men and women are made for political community. And that kind of community has its own covenantal characteristics that demand mutual accountability between citizens and government as well as accountability of the political community to God."

448. SAET interview on politics and theology #1 (Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology) Oct. 27.

"I am critical of those (whether Christian or not) who work largely within a liberal/conservative framework of individual autonomy as the foundation/source of political authority, and of those who see the “Church” as a counter-“polis” or alternative political community over against the state, thought of as outside Christian identity because it is recognized as legitimately using political force."
449. Reprint of "Guidelines for Government and Citizenship" as *Capital Commentary* October-December:

- [https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/01political.pdf](https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/01political.pdf)
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/PJR_01-Political_Community.pdf](https://www.cpjustice.org/uploads/PJR_01-Political_Community.pdf)

Government,
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/877](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/877)

Citizenship,
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/869](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/869)

Justice for Education,
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/865](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/865)

Just Welfare Policy,
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/861](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/861)

Upholding Life,
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/857](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/857)

Security and Defense,
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/853](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/853)

Conserving the Environment.
- [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/849](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/849)


“Government exists by the grace of God. Christianity does not exist by the grace of government. The implications of these simple affirmations are profound for the teaching of civic responsibility.”


*“We too are part of God’s creation.* Frequently when Christians talk about “creation care” they speak of creation as the non-human natural world in which we live and which serves as our “environment”. But keep in mind that creation, as the Bible presents it, is everything God created, including human creatures. We too are part of creation. We, too, require the kind of care that goes hand in hand with developing and stewarding all that God has provided for our hospitality.”

2011

452. Sermon Cloud "Inside Out 76": Interview, May 4, 2011 “Death Penalty”.


A radio interview discussing the question of how the death penalty can ever be just? Illinois had earlier that year become the 16th state to ban capital punishment, “that it is right and just thing to punish those guilty of heinous crimes with life in prison without parole instead of the death penalty.” Arguing from scripture, Christians can argue both for and against capital punishment. It is an interpretative question. And then it is also a matter of a Government’s motivation. There are those who seem to argue as if “force is force”, “violence is violence” without taking account of normative (moral and legal) contexts, that is, who has the right to do what when. When force is used in a retributive manner by Government it is not the same, normatively speaking as force used in a murder. The interview discusses death not only in relation to punishment but also in relation to abortion and euthanasia. Skillen pinpoints the humanistic drift in discussions about the “death penalty” and whichever way the law is framed there is a persistent assumption of human autonomy, constructing a normative reality in which humans shall henceforth live.

"There are several reasons for this article. The first is that the interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis remains as important today as it has ever been, and Christians can hardly avoid reaching a decision about how to understand these chapters. My aim is to offer an interpretation of the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 in the light of other biblical passages.

"I am also indebted to the late John H. Stek, long-time professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary, who helped me learn to read Genesis 1 and 2 as well as some of the psalms and other texts that illumine the Genesis texts. This article is one way to express my gratitude for his service as scholar and teacher.

"Finally, from my seminary days in the 1960s, on through graduate study, a decade of college teaching, and more than thirty-five years of directing the Center for Public Justice in Washington, D.C., the opening chapters of Genesis have served as a constant point of departure and return. The reason is that one of the most fundamental questions about the nature of government and the obligations of citizenship is whether God authorized government only because of sin or intended it as a dimension of human responsibility from the beginning as part of our very identity as the image of God, male and female, throughout our generations. While I do not address that question here, the reader will see how the interpretation and framework offered here set a course for trying to answer it in the future."


This is a text-critical and historical account of biblical term "covenant". "If the biblical meaning of covenant obligations to God is rooted in the very meaning of creations and pertains to the recovery and fulfilment of creation through the covenant of redemption, then the potential for covenant thinking in all spheres of life in today's rapidly shrinking world, is great indeed."


https://www.artway.eu/content.php?id=946&action=show&lang=en

A meditation and prayer on the windows in the Sint-Janskerk in Gouda, The Netherlands commemorating the long march to freedom and the search for release from dominance of oppressive governments.


https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/1029

This is a reprint of a *PJR* publication 2005. See No.354.

"In general, tax deductions are a means of encouraging certain kinds of action. The deduction for charitable gifts, for example, encourages philanthropy. However, dozens of tax deductions now on the books complicate the tax code in ways that can pit one purpose against another and keep government from collecting the taxes it needs. Those deductions can also negatively impact decisions in the marketplace. "People do not buy houses because of tax benefits," says Brunori. "They buy houses so that they have a place to call home." Widespread home ownership is what government should encourage, not tax deductions for the wealthy for reasons that are unnecessary."

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/705
See No.73.

“Politics in our day usually begins and ends with ‘the people’, perhaps in the form of ’We the people of the United States...’ or ’The People's Republic of China’, or ’the will of the people...’ or ‘return power to the people.’

“Christian politics begins and ends with ‘the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.’

“...The Christian view of political justice should be built directly on [an] understanding of God’s gracious patience and love. If this is done, then Christian politics will manifest itself not as the Church’s selfish attempt to control the state, nor as an interest-group effort to “get” benefits primarily for Christians, nor as a campaign to flood political offices with Christians so that Christians can control government for the enforcement of Christian doctrine on the populace.”

458. "10 years on" interview with Bob Sweetman Perspective Newsletter 45:2 September, 1-3.

A discussion about the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. “And yet, for the most part, we in the US interpreted the attacks from the viewpoint of what I would call an underlying civil religion.”


(A reprint of what was previously published in PJR in 1994).

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/683

“Almost everywhere today, authority is questioned. Anyone who holds an office of authority seems to come under suspicion ...[But] whether suspect or not, any position of authority forces this question: by what authority does one hold an office of authority?

“... At the very least we can say that American government is accountable to the governed. Americans have, by constitutional design, rejected autarchical government—the kind of government that depends on nothing outside itself and is accountable to no other body of human beings.

“But still we have to ask, in what sense do "the people" function as the ultimate authority to which government is accountable? If we answer that the people are ultimate because they need not appeal to anyone or anything beyond themselves, then we have simply transferred the idea of "autarchy" to the people. In other words, people acting democratically can do as they please and design government to do whatever they want it to do without reference to anything outside themselves.”


Skillen expounds Act 1:6 and discusses the validity of the last recorded question put to Jesus by His disciples before He ascended. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?” Skillen explore the redeemed creational character of Christian service in variegated responsibilities endowed upon the human image-bearers of the Lord. He explains the misrepresentation from long established efforts to view the Christian life in terms of a "New Israel” ideology.
461. "Government and Representation" *Capital Commentary* Nov. 4.

(A reprint of what was previously published in *PJR* Dec. 1994).

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/668

A recent article in Britain's Economist (Nov. 12) reporting on the last November's American election said, "All political structures are threatened by popular cynicism, distrust and the longing for more direct forms of citizen action. Revulsion goes wide and deep."

Strong language. But do Americans really long for more direct forms of civic action? Voters managed to act quite decisively last November to elect enough Republicans and to throw out enough Democrats to shake up Congress and put Washington on notice. Moreover, thousands of interest groups, many supported by citizens at the grass roots, maintain direct access to legislators in Washington and state capitals. Why then all the cynicism and distrust?

462. "Government and the Responsible Society" *Capital Commentary* Dec. 16,

(a reprint of what was previously published in *PJR* in June 2006).

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/649

"The fifth of six basic principles that govern the Center for Public justice touches on questions such as these. It reads:

""The policies of government should display the recognition that the ongoing development of human culture can thrive only in responsible freedom. Government therefore has no authority to try to direct the whole of society by attempting to gain direct control of the internal life of non-political communities, institutions, organizations, and human relationships. Rather, it should restrict itself, in accord with the principles of public justice, to the protection and balanced treatment of the social and cultural life of its citizens.""

463. "Four patterns of creation’s meaning” Presentation to 75th anniversary conference of the Association for Reformational Philosophy, Amsterdam.

This presentation was an early draft of what is found in No.506 God’s Sabbath with Creation. Part 2 "Revelatory Patterns."

2012

464. “Does our System demand too much of the President?” *CPJ Election Series 2012* January

(This is a republication of No.409)

https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/591

Persistently, Skillen, maintains the political view that electoral reform needs to enable American citizens to make their responsible contribution to accountable representatives who are elected in terms of national public policy.

"... Our system places too great a burden on the office of the president for the well-being of the nation precisely because of the wider, national democratic deficit. Beyond this year’s election ... we need democratic renewal that will enable American citizens to elect and hold accountable nationwide representatives to Congress."


This republication of article first published in The Political Science Reviewer, that has since ceased publication. (see No.335).


(See No.211 above, part of a project initially designed at Dordt College for the reformation of the political science curriculum).


Republished from PJR December 1996.
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/641

"For more than a century the Constitution's First Amendment has often been interpreted as if religion and freedom of conscience are purely personal or private ecclesiastical affairs. Even contemporary scholars such as John Rawls, who want to protect religious freedom, still believe that the civic dialogue can be carried on only by those who meet a standard of "political reasonableness."

Thomas Jefferson wanted the common school to teach every child to yield to the same moral sense so that all would be free to govern themselves. He did not realize the extent to which he was doing what the churches had done earlier in trying to get all children to subscribe to a creed that would give them entrance to civic responsibility. Jefferson wanted old-fashioned religion to remain private, but he wanted to define the public-confessional terms on which citizenship should be based."


(Root and Branch May 2008, No.406 above).
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/624

This addresses the common presumption that a common public reason should guide political debate. Skillen broaches two difficulties. The first difficulty is with the manner in which "religion" is defined as the opposite of "secular".

Granting equal treatment to citizens of diverse faiths in our constitutional system does not set the political system apart from religious convictions; it just means that the political community is no longer constitutes as a community of faith.

It is simply not true that public reason is the only thing that people of diverse faiths have in common. People of similar faith may well disagree on public policy, and thus it is quite legitimate for voters to seek to have candidate give an account of how their approach to government is rooted in the faith that shapes their lives.

The second difficulty is that the view too narrowly focuses upon the Constitutional protection of religious freedom as if this is merely a matter of recognizing an individual's conscientious beliefs. "Free exercise" is not merely about freedom to have whatever beliefs one has in private. It is also a matter of how a child's education is chosen by its parents; how social service providers serve those in need. Such protection of "free exercise" would lead to genuine pluralism. Citizenship is about membership in a political community in which citizens can freely participate from their diverse points of view.
"Foreword" to Ryan McIlhenny (ed) **Thy Kingdom Come: NeoCalvinists on the Two Kingdom Perspective**, Presbyterian and Reformed, ix-xi.

"The essays in this volume are of great importance for Christian life and thought in the twenty-first century. From biblical times to the present, Christians have understood that their life in this age anticipates the age of God’s fully revealed glory to come. They await the return of Christ and the climax of the revelation of God’s kingdom. Yet what is the relation between this age and the age to come? And how should Christians think about, and conduct their lives in the societies in which they live now? What does it mean to be in the world but not of the world? Should the church keep itself separate from the world or become fully immersed in it? Should Christians be trying to reform society or focusing on evangelization and strengthening the church to keep itself pure in a godless world? ... The great merit if the essays is their careful and critical evaluation of one tradition in the Reformed, Calvinistic line that offers a two-kingdom answer to the questions posed above."

"Seeking Harmony in China" **Capital Commentary** February 18

(Republished from *Root and Branch* April 2007 No.379).
https://cpjustice.org/public/capital_commentary/article/616

"Calvin, Calvinism and Politics" **Capital Commentary** February 25

(from *Root and Branch* April 2009, see No.429 above)

"The emergence of a pattern of civil-religious nationalism in countries influenced by the Reformed tradition, should lead Calvinists, and Christians generally, to take a more critical look at a development that is closer to idolatry than to Christian reformation... The New Testament certainly does not support the idea that any political entity after the coming of Christ can be God’s new Israel, modeled after God’s chosen people of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants."


(see 206. Published Online: 3 Jan 2012).

"... the new union did not resolve all problems of competing interests ... and it now provides some testimony to what might be possible in other regions of the world, such as contemporary Europe, where the federalizing process is at work."

Collection of “In the World” from **Christian Legal Society Quarterly** (1981-1994) in *Journal of Christian Legal Thought* 2:2 Fall.
https://www.clsnet.org/journal/fall2012/index

Brought together to provide a range of brief op-ed pieces for class-room use of students in social science, civics and political studies. The editorial intention was to ensure that material was available for discussion of complex public policy issues from a recognisably Christian political perspective.


"Thus, the reason the story of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ is so profound and glorious is not first of all because of what it does for sinners but because of what it does to reveal the glory of God in fulfilling God’s creational purposes. It is in Christ’s judgment and redemption of the creation that the bride of Christ, the children of God, the citizens of God’s kingdom find their redemption from sin and the fulfilment of their lives."

"Chaplin's reformulation may prove useful in countering those who think Dooyeweerd is an institutional essentialist. But in my view questions remain. Doesn't Dooyeweerd recognize that human persons are the subjects of the norms that hold for their functional capacities of communication, social interaction, aesthetic creativity, economic exchange, legal obligations, and so forth? And doesn't he take for granted that living persons exhibit those functional capacities in marriages, families, economic enterprises, the exercise of civic and governmental responsibilities, and other relationships and organizations? If so, then at least in that sense Dooyeweerd takes for granted that all human capacities and societal relationships are expressions of persons and contribute to human flourishing. I don't see a great difference, then, between Dooyeweerd's idea (perhaps too abstractly expressed) of a normative structural principle of the state, on the one hand, and Chaplin's idea of the state as an institution that emerges as a "normative imperative" grounded in the "given, stable, but dynamically unfolding, created structure of the human person ... While Chaplin avoids use of the word "invariant" in referring to the "normative imperative" of the state, he appears to transfer the meaning of "invariant" to the "given, stable ... created structure of the human person."

2013


Kuyper Lecture at Princeton 2001, see No.316 above.  
https://commons.ptsem.edu/id/princetonseminar2232prin-dmd007

Skillen’s “Kuyper Prize” for 2001 in which his lecture was titled “A Kuyperian Moment for the Church in God's World” can be found here:  
https://commons.ptsem.edu/id/06760#audio-player-container

2014


See No.486, No.507.


Victor Boutros, author of The Locust Effect, presented "Public Justice - Life and Death for the World’s Poor". Skillen, Robert Joustra and Kristine Kalanges were respondents. Skillen summed up: “Victor emphasizes that the underlying the problem of poverty is the problem of violence against the poor. What is needed, he says, is to transform weak and unjust institutions of law enforcement and criminal justice to the level where they can actually protect the poor instead of defending the wealthy from the poor. The biggest threats to the poor now come from police abuse, theft of property, and enslavement carried out directly by some public authorities and countenanced by others...The problems Victor is addressing are of utmost importance and the work of IJM deserves not only our applause but also our personal involvement and financial investment. I want merely to emphasize that both at home and abroad, there is a longer history and a deeper crisis of government and politics in which institutions of law enforcement and criminal justice are embedded and play their part. The cry for justice, particularly for public justice, is a cry for sound and fair government at every level for everyone.”

“Natural disasters are not the only things shaking the earth. The world’s political and economic institutions are quaking, and many are crumbling. The Arab Awakening that began in 2011 is changing the face of the Middle East and North Africa. Protests in China, Russia, and dozens of other countries continue on a low burn - at least for now. Growing numbers of Europeans are skeptical about the future of the European Union and are protesting against their national governments ... Today, talk of religion and politics is all the rage, in part because real struggles of a political-religious nature are raging all around us. ... What a time to reexamine Christian engagement in political life!”

Thus Skillen begins this “Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Introduction.” He proceeds with framing his discussion in terms of 3 basic questions: 1. What is the relation between politics and its cultural context (including religion and morality)? 2. What is government for and how should its responsibilities be properly exercised? 3. What, if anything, does Christianity have to say about political life and the ordering of society, and what, if any, political responsibility does the Christian faith urge upon those who profess to follow Jesus Christ?

The book is set out in 3 section - Part 1 The Biblical Drama (3 chapters); Part 2 Key Historical Developments (4 chapters); Part 3 Engaging Politics Today (6 chapters).

481. Skillen on Faith in Politics; 21st Century Democrats. 16 July

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6iMWc6ABWE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6iMWc6ABWE)

“The facts that you won’t get on FOX or CNN. Stay tuned to American Democrats dot Org.” Skillen is introduced as a theologian on this “21st Century Democrats” show. “The Supreme Court’s exemption for Hobby Lobby from Obamacare and the Justices’ incredible decision about contraception makes this a good time to hear from theologian James Skillen about the true role of faith in American politics.”


The editor of this Canadian (Reformed) Christian newspaper seeks to elicit Skillen’s view of the Israel-Palestine conflict, about the US Government’s destructive delusions about Iraq, the question as to whether Islam in its global impact has now peaked and is in decline, and the relationship between US foreign policy under Barack Obama’s presidency and American civil-religious nationalism. How should the America international diplomacy unfold if it turns away from the view that it is God’s chosen vessel for world peace? The editor concludes by asking how Christian churches heeding Jesus’ teaching (Matthew 24) should understand their public contribution in the years ahead?

483. Interview with Steve Bishop. Accidental Blog, related largely to the release The Good of Politics (470).

The interview aims to encourage the author to explain his book in personal autobiographical terms. It is brief but a useful indication of Skillen’s wide-angled vision of the cultural force-field of North American evangelical Christianity into which he was born. It outlines his discovery of a Christian philosophy that considered political responsibility to be integral to Christian discipleship. Though political responsibility is unavoidable it should be undertaken in a communal way by which Christian believers work to encourage each other in their citizen responsibilities and also to support those who are in public service.
2015


Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Harvard 2007) is widely celebrated, also among Christians who have enthusiastically endorsed this analysis. Skillen says he will engage critically, on two fronts, to outline his questions about Taylor’s approach. He wants to conclude, as the title of his essay suggests, with comments about “how far” this analysis can assist us in understanding the spirit of “secularisation”. He will suggest that “Taylor underestimates the institutional and social shaping power of modern secular beliefs that have done so much to shape and organize all areas of public and not only personal life.” In other words, Taylor misrepresents the impact of a secular belief upon a secularised intellectual outlook. Taylor’s suggestion of “a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life” implies those our spiritual disposition before God is one which we, in human autonomy, proceed to construct - Christianity in the “secular age” is but one of many “recompositions” of human spirituality. All people now are presumably busy in response to “transcendence.”


Skillen begins this 27 minute talk - a Biblical study - with quoting from Luke 22:24-28 to discuss Jesus the servant, the model for Christian disciples. This discussion about who are the “greatest” - “I am among you as one who serves.” To be a disciple is to answer an invitation from Christ Himself to come and learn how to be mature servants of the Lord! And this has enormous consequences for how we are to live out our political responsibilities.


This keynote address aims to encourage attendees at a conference on Christianity and international politics to consider three major challenges that face practitioners and theorists alike. The first is to recognize and deal forthrightly with the normative dimension of international political responsibilities. The second is to seek a big-picture understanding of our shrinking, diversifying world with all of its rapidly changing, intensifying complexities in domestic governance, non-government organizations, and international administrative and adjudicating bodies. The final challenge is to ask self-critically how Christians should be approaching the responsibilities they exercise in domestic and international affairs as well as in research, writing, and teaching in the field.


This article aims to encourage Christians to respond with vigor to Christ’s call to follow him in whole-life discipleship. Life in the public square, which includes the responsibilities of citizenship and government, is one of the arenas in which our love of God and love of neighbors must be exhibited. The author emphasizes two principles of justice that obligate governments and citizens. The first is “structural pluralism,” which requires constitutional recognition and protection of the diversity of God’s creatures and the diversity of human responsibilities and organizations. The second is “confessional pluralism,” rooted in God’s patience and mercy in this age, made manifest in the rain and sunshine that falls on the just and unjust alike. One of the implications for political life is that all citizens should be treated with equal justice without discrimination due to their faith.

Another contribution to the Unio Cum Cristo initiative from Jakarta that focuses upon the importance of identifying normative principles of human responsibility. He draws attention to the long-established political tradition in the West that derives from Plato’s view that a just society derives from a rational apprehension of the ideal polity.

The Biblical approach to political responsibility does not make an idol of reason. Instead of referring to the ideal form of Government, the Bible issues a normative call to do justice. “Justice is a norm that calls us to act in keeping with it, not a form that entices a quest for the rational capture of an ideal state.”


This is a second contribution to a web-based journal that existed for a short time in 2015. It was a follow-up to the earlier contribution from June 15. The question Skillen seeks to answer is this: how does the Bible direct our understanding of the normative demands that are given to human responsibility as part of our creation? Skillen pinpoints the operationalist tendency to reduce the Bible’s teaching by a story line that seeks to incorporate all that is written in the Bible’s many books to a “sin and salvation” story. In this way God’s purposes in creation are filtered down to merely confirm the story-line that reduces Christian faith to what is personal, private and associated with church membership. Skillen appeals to the teaching of Paul and Hebrews and John to highlight Biblical teaching that in Christ “all things have been created and all things hold together.”

This then is a prelude for developing a Biblically-directed view of the polity, the public legal order for which Government and citizens are responsible. Public administration involves ascribing due-respect to all the responsibilities of our creaturely life. In identifying a biblically-directed way of “doing politics”, Skillen is also Skillen is also suggesting that in living out such God-given responsibilities we will learn to read the Bible in a way that is spiritually deepened.

491. Interview - with Ken Myers. Mars Hill audio recording vol. 126. on understanding politics and all vocations from the viewpoint of God’s good creation purposes. https://marshillaudio.org/catalog/volume-126

“It finally dawned on me that the most basic question that wasn’t being asked was: Is government there because of sin, or does it have some root in Creation?”

This is a talk which discussed the necessity of keeping our beliefs about Creation tied to our convictions about redemption, and the importance of understanding the place of all cultural life within God’s plan of Creation. Within this neglected question, Skillen identifies two other forgotten inquiries. Namely, is Christianity solely a sin-salvation story and who is this Savior?

These questions lead to far-reaching consequences that extend into all matters of cultural life. Skillen argues that Christianity and all true religions are not, on the one hand, mere expressions of worship or, on the other hand, neutral institutions with a religious veneer, but entire “ways of life” that structurally inhabit and give life to human institutions, authority, and responsibility.

2016

492. Providence Christian College, Spring Academic Conference, Jan. 27.

“Is American Politics Broken Beyond Repair?”
“Too Much or Too Little Government: by what criteria do we decide?”
“America’s God and the God of Abraham, Israel and Jesus Christ.”

https://www.providencecc.edu/2016/01/27/academic-conference/

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKwx0yirM5U&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKwx0yirM5U&t=2s)

This symposium came at the conclusion of Gordon College’s invitation to Peter Berger (1929-2017) to contribute his critical thoughts on the failure of “secularisation theory” to deliberations in the Center for Evangelicalism and Culture and in particular to his essay “Faith in a Pluralist Age” which was to be one of the last essays that he penned.

See below No.505.

2017


Writes Skillen: “Werpehowski’s book is worthy of careful study, especially by those who want to understand Barth in relation to other ethicists. A criticism I have concerns the limits of Barth’s ethics with respect to human institutions and social practices for which humans bear communal responsibility. Werpehowski acknowledges that those limits are due to Barth’s focus on the relation of Christ to the individual person in the “ethical event.”

By contrast, at a few points in Part Two, Werpehowski draws in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who insists that it is in “friendships, families, work, citizenship, and life in the church” where Christ is present preserving and reconciling the world to God” (141). Despite all the attention in recent decades to Christian social and political ethics, the author does little with that subject in either his assessment of Barth or in the chapters of Part Two.”


As the title suggests this is an Interview aimed at giving contemporary supporters of the Center for Public Justice some idea of how the organisation started, how Skillen as its inaugural Director viewed his task. Why was CPJ and why was Skillen chosen to do much of the heavy lifting? Why was the name “Center for Public Justice” chosen and how did that relate to the time it was launched? What was at work for American Christians at the time and how receptive were Christians and others to CPJ? What have been the highlights and what are CPJ’s enduring guiding principles that have as much relevance today as they did forty years ago? Looking back, what hasn’t changed about the national conversation since CPJ’s founding? And looking ahead, what are some new challenges? What place does the Bible have in the life of CPJ in its contribution to the high calling of government for upholding justice?


This article begins: “The most obvious observation one can make today about the Trump presidency is that uncertainty rules. His lack of any prior experience in public office helps to explain much of this, and that was part of his appeal to voters who wanted radical change of the kind he called for with grandiose promises. Yet it is not only Trump’s lack of experience that shows; he is one of the most unqualified and unprepared persons ever to hold the office of president. He is largely ignorant of history and the responsibilities of government. He is reluctant to learn from experienced officials who understand what he needs to know.”
The article concludes on a similarly sobering note: "All of this leads me to conclude that the deeper and long-developing problems of American politics will remain and probably intensify during the Trump presidency. That is all the more reason why Americans should give more attention to the roots of the crises that brought Donald Trump to the presidency and less attention to the day-to-day performance of the president and Congress during the next four years. American Christians in particular should break with the false religion of civil-religious nationalism that undergirds the ‘America First’ ideology. They should be at work developing reforms of the electoral system to include proportional representation for seats in the House of Representatives and nationwide voting for the president and senators. They should insist on accountability of all officials to the rule of law, to the recognition and support of non-government institutions, and to more equitable patterns of taxation and distribution that reverse the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Justice and righteousness should become palpable in the practice of public service and statecraft.”

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol45/iss3/4

"In this essay I argue that God’s covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David build on one another in a progressive revelatory way that anticipates the new covenant promised in Jeremiah. This progression is different from imagining that each of those covenants displaced or replaced the one preceding it, and it is different from saying that the new covenant in Christ Jesus displaces all earlier covenants, putting them in the past tense from the moment of his resurrection. My thesis is that all of the earlier covenants, including God’s covenant with Israel, continue even now to bear witness to, and anticipate the fulfillment of, the new covenant God promised to make with Israel and Judah, the covenant that the apostles proclaim has been revealed in Jesus Christ. To understand this point, we need to recognize that from our present temporal point of view, God’s new covenant promises have not yet been entirely fulfilled. Messiah Jesus has come, but he has not yet returned. God’s kingdom has not yet been fully established. With the new covenant that God promised through Jeremiah, no one would any longer need to teach neighbors to know the Lord because “they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer. 31:34). That promise also has not yet been realized. Thus, we need to look again at how the new covenant is fulfilling the earlier covenants.”


This article begins: “Reading the New Testament and noticing the many ways its writers interpret Old Testament persons, events, and things like bread, water, and the temple as anticipatory types of Jesus Christ and the church is to read the text in a figural or typological way (the Latin figura became the equivalent of the Greek typos). While such interpretation is as old as the New Testament, it has been receiving new and fresh attention in biblical studies today.” Skillen engages Richard Hays, Northrop Frye to set the stage for considering the contribution of Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) who examined the development of figural interpretation in the Christian tradition in what became a widely influential essay —“Figura.” (German 1938 with an English translation 1959). What’s afoot in Skillen’s seeming divergence into literary criticism and what is said to be the history of the figural interpretation of the Bible?

“What makes the Bible a book—a coherent, organized collection of texts—can be explained only by the cosmic drama of which it is a part and to which it bears witness. Its contents, borne by the Spirit of God, manifest the not-yet-finished character of the drama.”

He concludes in these terms:
“What Frye and many other literary critics do not recognize adequately, however, is that the Bible is not just an ancient text whose influence on contemporary thought and literature continues because of the West’s historical dependence on biblical language and imagery. While that influence is clearly evident, it is because the Bible is more than a historically influential piece of human literature. Even today, therefore, at this advanced stage in the unfolding of the human generations, we still must live by faith, as Abraham lived by faith, in anticipation of the climax of God’s creation purposes in the “city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). To put it in literary terms from a human point of view, the Bible’s story has not yet reached “the end.” Whether ignorant of, or illumined by, the biblical light; whether rebelling against or living intentionally within the drama of God’s judgment and redemption of creation, no one can live outside created reality or outside the Bible’s metanarrative because they testify to the all-encompassing reality of God’s covenantal relation with the human generations and all creatures from beginning to climactic fulfillment.

“The work of Erich Auerbach offers indispensable insight into the development of figural interpretation in the Christian tradition, and it helps to show why we must continue to reexamine the meaning of the historical development of God’s revelation in relation to the origin and eschatological fulfillment of God’s creational purposes.”


https://larevuereformee.net/article/1283/le-temoignage-dans-lespace-public
[This was originally "Witness in the Public Square” an English essay in Unio cum Christo].


https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2017/02/10/the-trump-presidency-everything-up-for-grabs

This joint article is a straight-forward explanation of a view about the Trump presidency that the authors were to develop in the 2020 volume The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump (see No.510 below.) They outline their view and base their critique upon the evident lack of competence the man had for the office. “Yet Mr. Trump is ignorantly self–confident and without apology....” He requires no history lessons. He sees his lack of reflection as a virtue. His promise to repeal and replace “Obamacare” very soon became a matter of “repairing” the health insurance programme. His project was to build a wall to keep Mexicans out. His economic policies are filled with rhetoric that ignores the complex, global nature of the economy, let alone the challenges to be faced to a changing climate. There is the “odd” Russian connection and then of course there is the pathetic obeisance of Evangelical leaders who see Donald Trump as the person to stem the progressive tide.
Skillen’s paper identifies three points needed to overcome American idealism.

1. The first change necessary for reform is a conversion at the deepest level of American political culture, conversion to a vision of the nation as a governed polity. American civil-religious nationalism must be displaced by a growing civic commitment to the work of building a shared public trust, a just republic. This will mean acceptance of a more modest understanding of what a nation can and should be, namely, a civic community in which the diverse citizenry work to achieve and uphold a shared public trust. For the majority of citizens this will entail relinquishing the belief that the future of their lives and of the world depends on America being Number One in the world and the model for all nations. For many Christians it will mean giving up the deeply held belief that the Christian way of life and the American way of life fit together hand-in-glove as God’s light to the world.

2. Closely related to the first change must come the replacement of our dominant liberal ideology with a publicly minded, public-commons understanding of politics and government....

3. The third change we need is a significant rewriting of the Constitution to make it fit for the governance of a nationwide polity. The governments of states and localities can certainly be retained, but the federal government must become representative of the nationwide political community and so capable of governing it directly... one respondent replied:

You say in the first listed necessary change that "a conversion is needed at the deepest level of American political culture, conversion to a vision of the nation as a governed polity." But this follows hard on the heels of the statement: "I should state frankly here that I do not believe the changes necessary to address the critical conditions of American government and politics will be made." Now, although you go on to explain the changes and how hard it will be it might be useful to say more about your belief that these changes won't occur. What's the stumbling block here?
2018


"In the following paragraphs, I raise some questions about pre-suppositions underlying Berger’s proposed theory of pluralism and challenge the adequacy of his proposed theory to displace secularization theory, which continues to grip the minds, habits and institutions of people throughout the world. Finally I introduce a normative proposal of *principled pluralism* that may contribute to the pluralist conversation."

And then later in conclusion, "[Berger’s] pluralist theory is not sufficient, however, to assess the validity and just treatment of religions that operate beyond the narrow boundaries of "religion" as he defines it. Nor does his theory begin to come to grips with the reality of religiously equivalent ideologies and philosophies that have gained majoritarian influence in the United States and elsewhere to shape the structure and functions of government and other institutions in ways that do not uphold equitable pluralism."

(See No.493)

2019

506. *God’s Sabbath with Creation: vocations fulfilled, the glory unveiled*. Wipf and Stock.

In the Preface to this 350 page book, Skillen writes:

> When I was growing up, the Christian messages I heard in church were built around the sin-and-salvation story: humans are sinners alienated from God and headed for destruction; the only remedy for sinners is God’s saving grace and forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ who offers eternal life. As I grew older and became acquainted with different traditions of Christian worship and witness, I realized that the preaching, church liturgies, creeds and most hymns and educational classes are built around that story. over time, two questions grew on me: 1) is the fundamental identity of humans their sinfulness? and 2) is the fundamental identity of Jesus that he is the savior of sinners? In taking these questions to the Scriptures, I gradually became convinced that the sin-and-salvation story is an insufficient abstraction from the larger biblical story.

As well as giving his readers some idea of the way in which this volume and its many-sided discussion has evolved in his own reflections and writings, Skillen also provides here an indication of the way in which his own efforts in political science have had an impact upon his reflections, as he has striven to see that work in political science as integral to his *Christian vocation and to the creative reflection he has been enabled to put to paper in these many publications.*

In the early days of this writing-project (circa 2015) the stated title of the project included “political vocations” but with successive drafts of various chapters and with feed-back from a group he had asked to make comments on his formulations, the focus became steady upon vocational service *per se* and in that it is that larger picture, that fuller redemptive hope, that always beyond our human grasp that gives to us a sense of God’s leading, of God’s merciful love to us humans, male and female, in Jesus Christ.


This is a book that collates some of the contributions from a Vrije Universiteit, Kuyper Seminar of January, 2014. (see No.478, No.486)
2020

508. Interview with Chelsea Langston Bombino on God’s Sabbath with Creation in: Public Justice Review vol. 10, no.1.
https://www.cpjustice.org/public/public_justice_review/article/122
https://www.cpjustice.org/public/public_justice_review/article/123
(From CPJustice website) In this two-part interview CPJ’s Chelsea Langston Bombino discusses with Skillen the themes of his newest book, God’s Sabbath with Creation: Vocations Fulfilled, the Glory Unveiled (Wipf and Stock, 2019) and how those themes relate to the just ordering of a diversified society, which includes faith-based organizations of civil society. This interview discusses big-picture ideas related to God’s dynamic purposes for creation, especially for humans created in God’s image. Everything humans do in this age, both personally and in associations, has significance for the age to come. Such an understanding relates intimately to faith-based civil society organizations and the services they render. The second part explores how these themes connect to institutional pluralism, including the diverse spectrum of faith-based civil society organizations with varying mission focus areas. How does the creation story reveal and anticipate the fulfillment of all things in the sabbath glory of God? Skillen identifies the sixth-day identity of human creatures is exhibited in associations and institutions and this leads to addressing organizational complexity that raises far-reaching questions, also for Faith-based organisations that resist easy answers. How can these biblical themes have an impact and shape institutions that are established on the basis of explicit confessional principles for distinctive confessional purposes.


Skillen’s historical analysis drives deep into the cause of the crisis through which the USA and the West are now passing. It is a discussion that alerts Christians to the political task of contributing to a public legal order in a timely and integral way. Skillen’s opening paragraph reads: “It seems quite evident to many of us that the potency of nationalism today has a religiously deep character even if its power in some countries makes no appeal to a god. Often the compelling force of nationalism is most evident in places where contending nationalisms are at work, as in India today. In some cases, populist movements, some of which have gained control of governments, have arisen from or are closely related to nationalist ideologies. What does Protestant political thought have to offer in response to nationalism and populism? What influence has it had in the past either in conjunction with or in critique of nationalism?”


“The crisis we want to describe is not political in the narrow sense but a religiously deep tumult of ideological, institutional, and personal dimensions that is polarizing politics and crippling government. Our particular aim is to try to account for the seemingly inexplicable support evangelical Christians are giving the president whose conduct in office violates many of the very norms and standards that evangelicals have traditionally insisted upon.” Sider has brought together a group of Christians to address the serious situation in which the USA has plunged with the electoral triumph of Donald Trump in 2016. The authors claim “Donald Trump is not the source of the current dysfunction of American
politics. He is, however, the most prominent and outlandish expression of the
crisis in his actions, language, exercise of presidential responsibilities, and the
degree to which he holds captive Republicans in Congress. He is one of the least
spiritual persons ever to hold that office. So how is it that so many evangelicals
are dedicated to him and, in some cases, even honor him as God’s appointed
servant?” The Skillens develop the discussion they initiated earlier (see No.500).

2021


This discussion of the ambiguous twists and turns in the meaning of the term
"secular" covers some of secularism’s "prophets" - the "celebrity" atheists -
Dawkins and Dennett - the pragmatic pragmatism of Richard Rorty, the
persistent impact of Karl Marx, the dissonant view of Max Weber and also Sayyid
Qutb whose views in the 1920s initiated the emergence of a 20th century Islam
that would overcome the moral decadence of the West. There is the “secular”
realm, presumably, and there is also “secularism” inherent in Enlightenment
philosophy which, according to Carl Becker, sought to produce a “displacement
narrative” that would finally overcome the “stupidity, Christianity and ignorance”
that Europe had inherited. Most Westerners, while conceding the advance of
"secularization", do not buy into a complete secularization of life, even if most
assume that daily life can be lived without any reference to God or even a
divinity. The word “secular” had a significantly different meaning in the medieval
period. Humanism however uses the word in a way to bring emancipation from
religious supervision. Skillen notes “... that still dominant, modern narrative
about the meaning of life in this world is in crisis” and if “the true meaning of
human life and work and freedom in this age is rooted in our identity as the
image of God, ... then nothing less than a radical reorientation of our lives and
thinking along these lines will restore us to the life of faith, hope and love for
which God created us now and in the age to come.”

512. "Dooyeweerd’s problematic idea of cosmic time: toward a resolution,"

In this article, Skillen maintains a critical perspective on the philosophy of
Herman Dooyeweerd that he had initially formulated in his Doctoral Dissertation.
There, almost as a “naїve” reflection of the young doctoral candidate, he
wondered why Dooyeweerd had not included the “temporal modality” as the first
modality in his exposition of the “General Theory of Modal Aspects". (see No.12)
Skillen’s abstract begins: “Herman Dooyeweerd (1953, 28) writes that “the idea
of cosmic time constitutes the basis of the philosophical theory of reality in [A
New Critique to Theoretical Thought].” My aim is to present and defend the
hypothesis that Dooyeweerd’s idea of time is, in part, mistaken at its foundation.
His idea of a cosmic temporal coherence of diverse modal aspects arose from the
absolutization of a concept of temporal universality that he adopted uncritically
as the transcendental basic Idea of cosmic time. My immanent- critical
assessment leads to the hypothesis that temporality should be recognized as the
first modal aspect, which, for Dooyeweerd, has been lost to view. Recovering
both the sphere sovereignty of the temporal aspect and the equal universality of
all aspects opens the way to a resolution of Dooyeweerd’s temporal/
supratemporal dialectic and to a new perspective on naive experience and the
meaning of humans as God’s image.”