

Pluralism's Surprises: Limits and Possibilities of Neo-Calvinism in Education

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Honest philosophy welcomes relevant contributions from any source. Responding to a perceived lack of acuity regarding the notion of pluralism in education, Emily Wenneborg suggests that there are valuable conceptual resources to be drawn from a certain tradition of Christian thinkers, in particular a “neo-Calvinist” approach associated with Abraham Kuyper, Richard Mouw, Sander Griffioen, and others. Within a theological context, pluralism has sometimes been regarded suspiciously as, presumably, an invitation to an irreligious—if not outright blasphemous—pernicious relativism. Wenneborg’s neo-Calvinists resist this suspicious mood by framing pluralism as not necessarily a threat to Christian belief. If properly understood, pluralism may even be compatible with sincere and exclusive religious commitment. Understanding the ways in which pluralism is itself plural can help us develop a richer conception of how believers are actually situated and how they understand themselves.

This richer notion is fleshed out mostly in descriptive terms, beginning with Mouw and Griffioen’s sociological “taxonomy” of pluralism that includes “structural,” “contextual,” and “directional” types. There is a structural pluralism having to do with formal and informal human associations (for example, churches and families) as well as a contextual pluralism that references wider and older cultural contexts (for example, race, ethnicity, geography, social class). What they call directional pluralism (philosophers might be more accustomed to calling this “teleological”) makes the most trouble though, because it invites categorization according to groups’ official beliefs, their apparent ultimate purpose or end-in-view and the overall trajectory of their comprehensive conception of the good. But one can see how liberal theologians would be generally attracted to a pluralistic approach.

Putting the three pluralisms together, for example, may remind us that even though an Irish grandparent and an adolescent Mexican campesino may hail from wildly different structural and contextual environments, they are simultaneously Catholic co-religionists and therefore (more or less) harmoniously directioned. Once upon a time this was surely a horizon-widening realization, where those of a more nativist mindset might be liberated from aspects of their cultural imperialism. Spreading the gospel need not involve cultural eradication as widely practiced in earlier eras, for example, Indian boarding schools.

Among the many others one can imagine, Wenneborg sketches further pluralisms as well, most notably a “juridical” pluralism that seems to gesture toward the core religious and associational civil liberties foundational to western democracies, for example, those found in the First Amendment of the U.S Constitution’s Bill of Rights. Verging into moral and political philosophy, juridical pluralism may also be accompanied by a more celebratory “normative” pluralism that “wants to morally affirm and praise diversity as a normative good.”¹ Or, perhaps, in a Rawlsian vein, normative pluralism might be less robustly recognized as “the fact of pluralism,” that is, an inevitable outcome of rational minds operating in a free and open society whose divergences are desirable, not necessarily in themselves, but nevertheless as a reassuring symptomatology of freedom.² As an example: one might be nervous about the existence of strange religious cults but at another level recognize that their open existence implies a valued legal framework of civil freedoms.

Following Matthew Kaemingk, Wenneborg cautions that descriptive pluralism cannot be so neatly separated from normative pluralism in that accurate and “faithful” description requires a certain degree of adherence to ethical scholarly norms along the lines of care and honesty vis-à-vis the objects of one’s descriptions. (This is perhaps slightly debatable as one can easily imagine, let’s say, a “disdainful anthropologist” who has an attitude of contempt for the culture she describes yet is simultaneously compelled by norms of scholarly rigor to describe that culture thoroughly and with

detailed attention. For example, Robert Harris's speculative fiction novel *Fatherland* imagines an alternative history set in a post-World War II victorious Germany where there are anthropological "museums" devoted to the vanished Jewish culture).³ Yet, following the aforementioned neo-Calvinists, Wenneborg also argues for an imperative for educators that goes beyond mere responsible description and toward more active response.

While recognizing the *modus vivendi* requirements of a pluralist scheme of civil liberties (juridical pluralism), it is also necessary for those within one of the particular worldviews making up a pluralist society, i.e., the non-nihilists who actually believe things, to engage and assess alternative worldviews according to more normative—and universalizing—philosophical criteria. Wenneborg suggests these responses might have to do with such factors as whether or not the worldviews "do indisputable harm" or the level to which they are "conducive to human flourishing." This of course is tricky territory as any serious judgments along these lines will require a defense of the normative criteria from which those judgments might emanate. For example, someone who believes in an afterlife that is more important and "real" than our sublunary existence is not automatically going to share mainstream medicalist criteria regarding what constitutes harm. Christian Scientists' refusal of medical treatment comes to mind. Historians inform us that medieval and early modern witch burners quite sincerely felt that they were helping their victims *sub specie aeternitatis* in terms of the status of their souls. We often underestimate how severely beliefs may diverge and what appears from within our worldview as horrifying and pernicious may enjoy a compelling coherence within another.

Perhaps recognizing the inevitability of such incompatibilities and perhaps even incommensurabilities, Wenneborg suggests by way of conclusion that no matter how we might make our peace with it and recognize it in the descriptively sociological and juridical senses, "*nobody* wholeheartedly endorses and celebrates directional pluralism." (Though I would change the emphasis from "nobody" to "wholeheartedly.") She is surely right about this and, one is tempted to say, obviously so, but for the fact that in contempo-

rary education and politics we are constantly regaled with sloganeering about “celebrating diversity” and the like. Where our diversity celebrations run into difficulty, as I think, Wenneborg would agree, is when the issue is diversity in the area of directional pluralism, where it doesn't quite fit the happy talk of institutional public relations.

Describing the work of Rachel Wahl, Wenneborg concludes with what I take to be a kind of provocation (and I may be taking some liberties here in articulating her point): in the inevitable battle of substantive world-views where the interlocutors: a) actually believe in something (this is sometimes difficult to find) and b) seek to convince one another, counterintuitively it is often the (convinced) evangelicals who are more authentically open to those who believe differently from them than are the secular liberals. Secure in their cosmic direction, “based” as they say, they are often able to be more open to diversity and to adopt a more authentically pluralist and conversational mindset vis-à-vis others, whereas the committed secular liberals are too often the ones wanting to silence, censor and triumph via coercion.

Wenneborg's analysis brings important questions to mind. Why is it that evangelical atavists seem often able to accept and even welcome a greater degree of heterodoxy from oncomers? Is it that the seculars, as Alasdair MacIntyre long argued, have little more than emotive reactivism as ground for their convictions and are therefore not secure enough with their own beliefs to be as patient with disagreement?⁴ In its juridical mode, why does secular liberalism tend only in the abstract to celebrate directional pluralism while it so often clearly despises and writes off the actual others who are authentically differently directed? Especially currently, the liberal sort of “convincing” seems alarmingly prone to seek either instrumental conversion and conformity or cancelation and condemnation. It was supposed to be the other way around: liberals were the tolerant ones and believers were intolerant. What happened? How did that reverse?

Owning up to our directional allegiances may be less strategic vis-à-vis others and it may not always succeed if the end goal is conversion to the One True God or One True Politics. But cosmic direction of any kind

is now no longer as given as it once was. Liberal worries about pluralism have typically taken the stance of a juridical problem-solver, over and above the fray, who weighs and manages competing group interests and mitigates their tempestuousness. In other words, an abundance of strong believers is assumed to be the reality on the ground, the problem scene for the putative juridical observer. Yet we may now be faced with a somewhat different and perhaps more vexing set of problems occasioned not by a surfeit of fervent believers but rather by their scarcity. What happens to all this pluralism when the ideational wellsprings of past belief and devotion are all around us drying up? Can there be meaningful “pluralisms” without a threshold of worldview narrativity that is traditionally maintained by those whose very presence constitute the elements of that which is plural? Due to the dissolution of its components, pluralism’s sound and fury in fact may be signifying less and less.

1 Emily Wenneborg, “Making Sense of Pluralism: A Neo-Calvinist Approach,” *Philosophy of Education* 77:1, 2021.

2 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 173.

3 Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (New York: Random House, 2006).

4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 16-35.