

Centralization and Civil Society

An Interview Between John Bolt and Joseph E. Gorra

How we understand the “centralization” of political power in relationship to the health of a “civil society” is one of the most historically significant topics that a citizen could consider in his or her society. In this interview, Professor John Bolt helps us understand some of the more salient issues in this discussion and how Christians have and can continue to contribute to this important area. The social vision of Abraham Kuyper and Alexis de Tocqueville are also discussed.

Can you give us a snapshot of how you understand the concepts of “centralization” and “civil society” and their significance?

Perhaps the easiest way to get at it is to consider one of the many “problems” of our society, let’s say teenage pregnancy. When those who we might call “centralizers” begin to consider this as something about which *something* must be done, they look to government-mandated sex education, free distribution of condoms---spending money for something---and the like. By contrast, thinking in civil society terms directs us to families, churches, community standards and resources (including those now quaint institutions, “homes for unwed mothers”). And that’s the only way to renew morality and social capital. When we reflexively turn to state-solutions for our social problems we contribute to “centralization.”

What does it mean to have a strong vs. weak civil society? How does it look?

A strong civil society is one in which the non-state institutions and associations are the first line of address to social problems and when government policies encourage them to flourish. A concrete example was President George W. Bush’s compassionate conservatism that encouraged faith-based organizations to do the heavy lifting in education of poor children, diaconal relief in emergencies such natural disasters,

child care in cases of family breakdown, nursing care of the elderly, helping prisoners re-enter society, etc. By contrast, whenever the state takes over these roles and people expect the state to “do it,” it then becomes the destroyer of civil society.

How does the strength/weakness of a civil society relate to the strength/weakness of centralized power? How do these “dynamics” interrelate?

They are perfectly mutual and symbiotic in a pathological way. Education and cultural critic Neil Postman uses an ecological metaphor to describe this. Responding to Dewey’s dictum that “the teacher always is the true prophet of God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God,” Postman points to problems created for social ecology when the school takes over the functions of the family, the church and synagogue, etc. He puts it this way: “The more one social institution encroaches upon the functions of the other, the more it weakens it. “ When the state feels an obligation to feed children as well as teach them the multiplication tables in its schools, signs them up for the latest social, environmental, or political cause as part of their homework, the state usurps the function and authority of the home and religious community.

How might one’s view of freedom and human flourishing relate to this discussion? What sort of anthropology helps to underwrite your perspective on this discussion?

My understanding of what it is to be truly human is to be a free child of God, living a responsible life guided by Scripture and the wisdom of the ages. We flourish in contexts of ordered liberty where we are responsible moral agents rather than patients or dependent victims.

You are a systematic theology professor at Calvin Theological Seminary. You also have some formative pastoral experience. As a pastor and a professor, how did you get interested in this topic? Help us understand a little more of your journey in this area.

I am an immigrant; when I was three years old my parents moved from The Netherlands and joined my maternal grandparents in a small rural village south of Vancouver, British Columbia.

My Dutch immigrant community was indelibly shaped by the Reformed worldview and lifestyle of those who had been taught by Abraham Kuyper. Our first communal act was to start a church, but within a year or two it included a small Christian day school. In that cross-cultural context one is forced to reflect on what it means to be a Christian in relation to being Dutch and Canadian. It's only in the last few years that I see how important this was in making me who I am as a person, as a Christian, and as a theologian. It's why I am drawn to systematic theology, to those "big picture" issues like the incarnation and culture, gospel and law, the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, and questions like: is Jesus Lord of a nation in the same way that he is Lord of the Church? These are the questions that intrigued me as a college and seminary student, as a pastor trying to make sermons that were both biblical and practical, and as a theologian and seminary professor.

You are the author of the celebrated book, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham's Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Eerdmans, 2001). Among the many interesting things in this book, you put Kuyper's views on poverty, wealth, power, pluralism, etc., in "dialogue" with the thought of Alexis de Tocqueville, Lord Acton, Pope Leo XII, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Jonathan Edwards. Can you give us a preview of what you have found to be so resourceful about Kuyper's work on the centralization of power and the importance of a civil society?

In the course of working on that book I truly "discovered" Alexis de Tocqueville. What I discovered is that Abraham Kuyper in one of his very first political addresses quoted Tocqueville more than anyone else. The two men (along with Lord Acton) shared an anxiety about tyranny, about the tendency of the state to aggrandize power unto itself. And both realized that the real antidote to state tyranny is a healthy civil society. Kuyper put it in terms of "spheres of society" that have their own integrity, do not derive their authority from the state but directly from God, and are ultimately

responsible to God. Parents have a right to say “no” when the state usurps their religious authority as parents.

Can you do some vision-casting for us? As you think about older and more recent literature on centralization and civil society, what do you see as some further areas to develop as Christian philosophers, ethicists, theologians or apologists?

I guess I am less into vision-casting right now than into recovery. I am encouraged, for example, by the way that Christian scholars are recovering the importance of natural law for ethics and apologetics. The older I get, the more I realize how much of the received wisdom of the Christian church has been neglected by North American Christians. We are so enamored of our “new world” status that we keep reinventing ourselves into new forms of foolishness. Evangelical Christianity, thanks to its revivalist roots and voluntarist temperament---needing to be born again and again and again---has been engaging in that recovering in the last decade or two and I find that very gratifying. I am honored to have played a minor role in that with the work that I have done on the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck.

Dr. John Bolt is Professor of Systematic Theology, Calvin Theological Seminary and has served as pastor of Christian Reformed churches in Penticton and Kelowna, B.C. For John, the task of the systematic theologian is to pay attention to the big picture of the Christian faith, to summarize the grand truths of scripture in a coherent way, and listen closely to the voices of important theologians throughout church history. John's goal is to communicate to students the vision of the Christian faith from a Reformed perspective. John is the author of *The Christian Story and the Christian School, Stewards of the Word*, and *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology*. He is also the editor of the four volume English edition of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*.