

Book Excerpt

The Pluralist Game:

Pluralism, Liberalism and the Moral Conscience

by Francis Canavan (Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

“On the Fundamental Issues of Social Life, One Side Always Wins”

This tightly-written, scholarly but readable book provides a context for understanding the cultural struggle that is currently being played out in our schools and courts. Must a democratic society teach children that homosexuality is equal to heterosexuality? That lesbian mothers are as good for society as a traditional family? Is social affirmation of homosexuality a legitimate civil-rights demand?

Francis Canavan, a Jesuit scholar and professor of political science, attempts to sort out the ways society can function under the conflicting demands of pluralism. He makes several key points. When individual liberty is the only acknowledged ordering principle, community disintegrates, and government becomes nothing more than the arbiter of an unending series of competing claims for “rights.” He believes *it is essential that we acknowledge a public philosophy*. Subjectivism and liberalism are not “neutral” philosophies. Philosophically, one side always wins.

He notes that the moral and intellectual consensus on which our society has lived is rapidly disintegrating. “There is a widely diffused feeling that we are ceasing to agree even in basic aspects on what man should be, and how he should live...For multitudes today, truth is only what the individual thinks is true, good is only what the individual personally prefers, and justice is his right to act on his preferences.” Liberalism, the guiding principle of our society, has “blossomed into mere permissiveness.”

“The reasoning is everywhere the same,” he writes; we believe that “Freedom of expression is a seamless robe, and we cannot pull one thread out of its fabric lest the whole garment should unravel. Expression is expression...and all forms of it stand or fall together.” If pornography is restricted, then, it is said, the right to free exercise of religion will be equally threatened. But “there is no reason to believe that the successful operation of democratic institutions depends on the availability of peep shows.”

At the core of this insistence on unlimited liberty is the belief that there is no *objective good*, and that all lifestyles and con-

victions are merely subjective tastes and preferences, all of which are equally entitled to protection under the law. In fact subjectivism is, he says, the essence of liberalism.

“Millions of Americans are no longer sure that either faith or reason can tell them what virtue is, or how to acquire it. They are left with the uneasy feeling (or the passionate belief) that all individual opinions and appetites are morally equal, and should be equal in the eyes of the law...it is assumed that there are no objective moral truths that individuals can recognize and agree upon.”

Freedom: The Only Universal Good?

Subjectivism and individualism have had a corrosive effect on our culture. “To put it briefly, liberalism has made freedom the *essential and defining characteristic* of man...Truth itself—whether religious philosophical, or moral—must be subordinated to the requirements of the individual’s liberty...

The one conviction on which free men can agree is that orthodoxy is dangerous.”

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“Yet liberty and equality cannot be the highest values of a political system because they relativize and ultimately destroy all other values. When we make them our supreme norms, we have no set of objectively valid human ends that can provide answers to the questions,

‘Liberty for what?’ And ‘Equality in what?’ We therefore cannot have the communal beliefs without which, in the long run, there is no community. In short, American society now lacks what Walter Lippman once called the public philosophy. We shall lack it increasingly as the moral and religious capital of our culture, on which liberalism has always traded even as it eroded it, is drained away. We are left with an unending battle between conflicting claims to liberty and equality, and no publicly acknowledged principle which to resolve the conflict.”

The problem is, he says, that subjectivism and individualism are not “neutral” philosophies. “The pluralist game will continue to be played, of course, because there is no other game in town. But there is no need for it to keep on being a confidence game in which one side proclaims its cause as

Should the State be the Educator?

neutrality, and the other side is gullible enough to believe it. Societies *do* face moral issues to which they must give moral answers...We shall play the pluralist game more honestly, perhaps even with better results, if we admit openly what the game is, and what stakes we are playing for."

"Viewed from a certain angle, the ultimate liberal ideal appears to be normlessness. Normlessness, however, turns out to be itself a norm. It is a steady choice of individual freedom over any other human or social good that conflicts with it, and unrelenting subordination of all allegedly *objective* goods to the *subjective* good of individual preference. Such a policy does not merely set individuals free to shape their own lives. It necessarily sets norms for a whole society, creates an environment in which everyone has to live, and exerts a powerful influence on social institutions."

Even in a pluralist society, he says, there is a public morality. "Divided though it be, the community is a community by virtue of what its members have in common. Among the things they hold in common are certain moral values and principles." The values of the majority of the community determine the norms that society will favor or even impose—either by pressure of opinion or by force of law.

For example, civil-rights laws which single out homosexuals are not simply "neutral" applications of liberty and equality. "To the extent that they are a demand for public acceptance of homosexuality as a separate but equal way of life, [they] pose an issue to which *there is no neutral answer*. This is a demand that the public commit itself to a particular view of the nature and function of sex in human life. Faced with this demand, the public and its government cannot commit itself to a specious neutrality by leaving the matter to individual consciences...government is under constant pressure—to which it frequently yields—to use its power to promote or enforce new norms in the guise of leaving normative decisions to individuals. The net result is not *no norms*, but *different norms* and reshaping of the institutions of society."

Marriage is a Contract with Social Consequences

If we believe that government has no business deciding what forms of marriage it should or should not recognize, "we are saying that the only value of marriage is a purely private one. The best sexual relationship is the one that best pleases the individuals who participate in it. Their pleasure is the norm, because no other norm is admissible. But accepting that proposition is not normlessness. It is the clear choice of one basic social norm over all others, a choice that has far-reaching consequences for society."

Similarly, when the state teaches only secular subjects from a secular point of view, it observes a neutrality that is tantamount to agnosticism, favoring "those of its citizens who regard religion as irrelevant to life, and believe that all human problems have purely human and secular answers. . . . The conclusion ought to be that the state is not well qualified for the task of teaching." Precisely as a recognition of pluralism, he says, the state should give support to different kinds of schools. This would solve many of the bitter battles today over sex education, affirmation of homosexuality, and trends toward divisive forms of multiculturalism. In a pluralist society a secular *state* is acceptable, Fr. Canavan says; but that does not mean we in turn must be a secular *society*.

Fr. Canavan believes that the just and ordered society is that which is governed by natural law. "For the present purpose it will be enough to call natural law any binding moral principles not made by men, but derived by reason from the nature of things or, more usually, from the nature of man...we are obliged to choose to act in accordance with it, because to violate it would be violating our own nature...Natural law must be translated into positive law through the medium of

some group's conscience, to which conscience those of us who believe in natural law must appeal."

"Secular humanism," he notes, "is *not* the least common denominator of all American beliefs about human welfare. It is but one sectarian view among many, and any American is free to believe that he derives from his religion a richer, fuller and more truly human image of man. He is also free to use it as a basis for the views he

advocates on public policy."

The popular humanitarian-utilitarian ethic of today regards suffering as an absolute evil, and individual self-fulfillment as the highest good. Thus it is no accident, he says, "that the idealism of youth today is seldom directed toward self-conquest and self-discipline—these are easily dismissed as 'masochism'—but almost always toward social justice and the reform of institutions." Similarly, the self-denying struggle to overcome homosexuality tends to be disparaged, particularly by the intellectual elite.

Because our democratic society assumes it can uphold no rational standard for a hierarchy of values, "we stipulate that all goals are equal...Justice thus loses all substantive content and becomes pure form...The pluralistic society, therefore, stands upon no *moral* principles, but is unified only by the *procedural* principle of an official neutrality."

"But if we carry liberal individualism to its logical term in

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order to preserve unity through pluralism, we shall learn that this solution, too, carries a price. The constant disparagement of particular communities and their beliefs, and the steady subordination of their cherished ideals to the unity and stability of the political society, end by robbing the political society itself of vitality, and drying up the springs of political loyalty and love of country. Those who do not love their families, their kinsmen, their own kind, their neighborhoods or their churches are not likely to love a merely *political* unit, or the democratic system."

"The attack on social moral standards is most obvious at the present time in the demand for 'gay rights' laws. The demand succeeds as often as it does because in this country's current egalitarian mood, it is hard to mobilize public sentiment against laws that only seem to *forbid discrimination*. But the thrust of these anti-discrimination laws is toward a deep change in social morality... Some like chocolate, some like vanilla. Some like Mozart, others prefer heavy metal. Some like girls, some like boys. ..It is all the same because man is a bundle of desires, and each man strives to satisfy the desires that he has. Society's only task

is [supposedly] to preside over the striving with impartial neutrality so that we can all live together in peace."

"Liberalism as a theory of ethics and politics lasted as long as it did because it is assumed that rational and decent people would see the difference between moral right and wrong, and would for the most part respect it. Liberalism however was able to do this because it incorporated into its idea of personal freedom moral norms that it did not create, but inherited from the classical and Christian past."

In summary, Fr. Canavan says, "A pluralist society must perforce strive to be neutral about many things that concern its divided citizens, but it cannot be neutral about all of them. If it tries or pretends to be neutral about certain issues, the pluralist game becomes a shell game by which people are tricked into consenting to changes in basic social standards and institutions, *on the pretense that nothing more is asked of them than respect for the rights of individuals*. Much more, however, is involved: on the fundamental issues of social life, *one side always wins*." ■