

A vision of justice: John Rawls, 1921-2002

by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

As liberal democracy spreads across more and more of the globe, the influence of John Rawls seems likely to spread. Rawls, who died on November 24 at age 82, wrote the 20th century's most complete philosophical defense of that form of government. He takes his place with political thinkers from Locke and Jefferson to Bentham and Mill who shaped the Anglo-American vision of liberalism. He also provides a framework for thinking about democracy and justice across a wide range of economic conditions and cultural traditions.

Rawls first attracted interest because of his concern for social justice. He argued in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) that inequalities of wealth, status and power must be justified by the benefits they bring to those who are least well-off. The income, security and privilege that corporate executives and medical specialists—and, one must add, religious leaders—enjoy are legitimate only to the extent that they enable the relatively affluent to create conditions that make life better for those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. While this requirement may still allow a wide range of wealth and income, it is more restrictive than the utilitarian criterion employed by earlier liberal philosophers, who simply required that inequalities contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number.

Rawls's liberalism is also very different from the libertarian rule that many people assume democracy implies—that people are entitled to as much wealth as they can get and hold through honest exchanges with other free agents. Rawls's carefully crafted explanation of why rational people would accept liberal democracy in the first place showed that democracy's procedural safeguards also have substantive implications for its standards of justice.

Rawls's version of liberal democracy imposes other constraints which have made it problematic for religious thinkers. Because a democracy requires that everyone be able to accept its basic institutional structures, only the most elementary, shared

human aspirations for security and survival can be allowed to shape those institutions. Particular visions of human good and human community can be pursued within that framework, but the institutions cannot be used to impose a vision of community.

In practice, this seems to mean that a prophetic call for higher forms of justice or an ideal of community based on Jesus' love for neighbor has no place in political discussions. What we ask for in the courts, in the legislature or in election campaigns must be based on "public reasons" that everyone accepts. Political arguments have to begin with what we already agree on. Calls to expand our vision or enlarge the boundaries of our community belong someplace else.

Rawls's more recent writings, however, brought these formal constraints outlined in *A Theory of Justice* into closer contact with the way that the political and moral life is actually lived. People do have comprehensive ideas about the good, and these ideas regularly influence their politics. In most public discussions, it is entirely appropriate for them to articulate those visions and try to persuade others to share them. Indeed, in *Political Liberalism* (1993) Rawls cited 19th-century abolitionists and leaders of the civil rights movement to show how religious ideas can change the basic structures of society without violating the requirements of public reason.

The limitation that Rawls's liberalism imposes is simply this: when we want to invoke the coercive powers of government to secure compliance, a conviction about the rightness and virtue of our own vision is not enough, not even if we can persuade a majority of our fellow citizens to accept it and join us in imposing it on the minority. People have to accept it through their own reasoning, or it has no moral meaning at all.

Rawls's liberal theory of politics, which owes much to Locke's social contract, rests in the end on an ethics based on Kant's respect for the autonomy of each individual person. The same justice that requires us to deal with inequalities in ways that benefit those persons who are least well-off forbids us to require persons to live by our ideas of the good, even when they seem badly in need of an idea of the good and even when we believe our idea of good is God's will for them.

Both religious and philosophical critics have recently taken to dismissing Rawls's liberal democracy as a last vestige of Enlightenment rationalism. Treating people as autonomous individuals, apart from the virtues and visions that their communities

teach them, seems from this postmodern perspective to be hopelessly “modern.”

Certainly traditions and communities are far more important than *A Theory of Justice* lets on. A great deal of the future of liberal democracy depends on whether its institutions, which Rawls has so carefully delineated, can be made to bear the weight of religious visions and cultural aspirations in parts of the world that do not share the Enlightenment history.

Christians would nonetheless do well to remember Bonhoeffer’s warning that we must not simply abandon the Enlightenment contribution to ethics. It is a permanent reminder not to claim special privileges to impose our ethics on others. In the same way, Rawls’s liberal democracy sets a standard for Christian thinking about politics and justice. We may have a more demanding vision of what human community can be, but we can hardly expect it to succeed if we lose the respect for persons and their ideas that liberal democracy has taught us.