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Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-Based Schools and Social Agencies (Book Review)

John Hiemstra

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ironic wit and concern for hypocrisy are exemplified in this memorable (paraphrased) vignette:

> In the splendid palace chapel a stately court preacher, the cultivated public's elite, advances before an elite circle of fashionable and cultivated people and preaches emotionally on the text of the Apostle, "God chose the lowly and despised" – and nobody laughs! (xix, 356)

For Kierkegaard, hypocrisy also means conforming to the crowd. "To win a *crowd*," he writes, "is no art; for that only untruth is needed, nonsense, and a little knowledge of human passions" (23). If you want to be loathsome to God, just run with the herd (244).

From a reformational perspective, Kierkegaard can be criticized for his individualism. But that criticism often takes an unfair turn. Kierkegaard was not an individualist in the Enlightenment sense—far from it. Rather, his stress on the authenticity of the individual was a reaction to the corporate hypocrisy that he experienced within the official Danish (Lutheran) church, and it diminished his perception and understanding of the Body of Christ. This point becomes more apparent when one considers Kierkegaard's concern for the biblical teachings on suffering for righteousness sake, on self denial, and on radical servanthood.

> Christ willed to be the socially insignificant one. The fact that he descended from heaven to take upon himself the form of a servant is not an accidental something which now is to be thrust into the background and forgotten. No, every true follower of Christ must express existentially the very same thing—that insignificance and offense are inseparable from being a Christian. As soon as the least bit of worldly advantage is gained by preaching or following Christ, then the fox is in the chicken house. (223)

It might be argued that Kierkegaard is one with reformational thinking on the topics of the sovereignty of God and the creaturely finitude of humankind. In accepting this argument, one also begins to see that Kierkegaard is far from being the irrationalist that he is thought to be.

If reformational thinking is to continue to contribute to God's Kingdom in the twenty-first century, it will need to remain fresh and authentic. One way of doing that is to learn about authenticity and radical servanthood as conceived by Søren Kierkegaard. And *Provocations* provides the best introduction to Kierkegaard and these lessons.

The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-based Schools and Social Agencies, by Charles L. Glenn (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 2000). 315pp, with a foreword by Peter L. Berger. Price: US $35.00. Reviewed by John Hiemstra, Associate Professor of Political Studies, The King's University College, Edmonton.

Government daily offers an "ambiguous embrace" to the readers of *Pro Rege*. This community operates a variety of Christian organizations—day schools, social agencies, and colleges—as strategic ways of engaging the dominant secular culture. Inevitably, these organizations feel the embrace of government regulations, employment standards, professional certification requirements, and in some cases public funding. Charles Glenn does the Christian community a huge favor by carefully examining the effects of government action on these faith-based organizations. He argues that government's embrace of faith-based organizations is often ambiguous; that is, sometimes it's a fair and beneficial hug while at other times it's a stifling and secularizing squeeze.

The central thrust of Glenn's argument is that the government's embrace of religious schools and social agencies can weaken and eventually destroy their faith-based identities. Each chapter works through various external and internal threats to the identity of these agencies.

Even when government does not publicly fund faith-based agencies, Glenn begins, it rightfully supervises their activities in order to protect the weak and ensure the public interest. Threats to religious identity arise when government oversteps its proper competency. Glenn offers a very helpful exploration of how judicial interpretations of the religion clauses of the First Amendment to the American Constitution have rigidly separated religious schooling from government while paradoxically allowing a far stronger relationship between government and faith-based social agencies.

When government chooses to publicly fund a faith-based agency, Glenn continues, a variety of policy instruments are available from which to choose, instruments that may maximize agency autonomy and minimize improper government oversight, e.g. franchising, grants, contracting out, and vouchers. Each mechanism has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. In particular, Glenn highlights the innovative new "Charitable Choice" provision of the Federal welfare law which serves to protect the religious identities of agencies that cooperate with governments in serving the poor (107-110). (For more information on this helpful new provision, see http://cpjustice.org/charitable-choice.html.)

Glenn offers an excellent and incisive analysis of the threat that secular professional norms pose to faith-based schools and social agencies. The problem with certain professional qualifications, Glenn argues, is that "the theories about human nature and about good and evil that have been elaborated as the basis for those professions are at important points in conflict with the biblical

understanding of humanity's created purpose" (182). Clearly, when government requires agency staff to live up to these secularized professional norms, this pressure can produce serious conflict with the identity of the faith-based agency.

The threat to religious identity, however, is never simply external. Glenn shows how agencies often become accomplices in eagerly adopting professional standards in order to appear more mainstream and expert. In these cases, faith-based agencies internally capitulate and dilute or outright reject their religious identities.

A further threat to the identity of faith-based agencies is the development of legal anti-discrimination requirements for hiring. While Glenn praises the intent of these measures, he notes that they can also make it difficult for faith-based agencies to hire staff who agree with, and want to further, the agency's goals. Too often, Glenn emphasizes, agencies internally capitulate even when they are not required to do so by government officials.

Government relations with faith-based agencies, Glenn concludes, are often like a two-edged sword: public policies can be aimed at good ends and still harm the religious identities of agencies. Government's relationship with faith-based agencies is truly an ambiguous embrace!

To leave our discussion at this point, however, would leave the mistaken impression that the book argues out of self-interest, that faith-based agencies simply want to protect their special interests. Glenn wisely frames his analysis in terms of the bureaucratizing and centralizing tendencies of the welfare state.

Contrary to Christians who reject any positive role for the state, Glenn thinks that "there are good reasons for government to continue an active role—perhaps even more active, in some respects, than at present—in ensuring that educational and social services are adequate and accessible" (22). He rejects the notion, however, that the state must directly deliver these services. Glenn rejects the false polarization between a centralized welfare state and a decentralized market system. Instead, he argues that many features of the welfare state can be delivered more "effectively" by a revitalized and enabled "third sector" or civil society. "The public policy challenge is to find ways to retain the unquestionable benefits of the welfare state while restraining and even rolling back its distorting interventions in the society" (166).

It may be a happy coincidence that faith-based agencies are more *efficient* at times, Glenn argues, but the principled reason for their value is their *effectiveness*—their religious approach can solve some problems that elude direct government services. He explores the various models of government relating to faith-based agencies by surveying the Catholic theory of subsidiarity, the Calvinist idea of sphere sovereignty, and practical schemes like neo-corporatism in various European countries (131-164).

Practitioners within faith-based schools and social agencies will discover a host of serviceable ideas and advice in this book. For example, Glenn counsels against the separation of so-called "secular" and "religious" functions in faith-based agencies in order to please government. Once major functions of an organization are identified as secular, Glenn argues, it can become "impossible to apply religious criteria to employment and thus protect the nature of their mission" (211). Another example of good advice is Glenn's discussion of the Dutch debate over the identity of religious schools. Here he offers a variety of practical suggestions on how schools can enter a process of maintaining and deepening their religious identity.

In response to dominant secularizing forms of professionalism, Glenn argues for alternative forms of training for "teachers, social workers, and other professionals who will be *fully as professional* as their counterparts working in nonreligious settings *but in a different way*" (191). Christian colleges with professional programs take note! He also suggests that governments adopt "alternative forms of professional certification."

A delightful feature of Glenn's book is its openness to international practice. He explores how a variety of European countries deal with government and faith-based agencies in order to inform his American analysis. Although some sections of his book deal with issues that are idiosyncratic to America (e.g. strict separation of church and state), Glenn's overall analysis remains valuable for non-American readers.

Glenn also offers practical "Interludes" between the analytical chapters in order to concretize issues. For example, he discusses actual agencies like "Teen Challenge" (62-73) and "The Salvation Army" (212-240).

Readers of *Pro Rege* will also be interested in Glenn's distinctive Christian approach to writing this book. He does not start by announcing his intent to develop a Christian approach to his topic, as is so common in some Reformed traditions. Nor does he adopt a shallow neutralist approach to scholarship. Rather than scare readers off with a powerful declaration of religious convictions at the outset, Glenn adopts a style that invites readers to examine his arguments and evidence from the inside out. As the book proceeds, it becomes more and more clear what Glenn appreciates and dislikes. His Christian orientation clearly emerges from his arguments and affirmations, as well as from the footnotes.

As Christian organizations struggle to maintain and mature their identities in the face of new challenges, they would do well to heed Glenn's insights into the benefits and pitfalls of *The Ambiguous Embrace*. This incisive book deserves to become required reading for employees, those who train employees, board members, and government regulators of Christian schools, colleges, and social agencies.