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Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Monsma, Stephen V., and J. Christopher Soper. *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2nd ed., 2009. 265 pages. ISBN: 978-0742554177. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies and Public Affairs emeritus, University of Illinois at Springfield.

As a substantive contribution to contemporary political science literature, *The Challenge of Pluralism* is an unusual book. Its presentation is based upon empirical inquiry, but it offers normative commentary upon the meaning and consequences of the findings presented. As an analysis and commentary on the relationship of church and state in mature democratic nations, it is an extraordinarily ambitious book. It illuminates complexities regarding the issues of religion and public policy in five different national cultures. Finally, as an articulation of a Reformed critique of governmental practices in five democracies, it is temperate and judicious. Readers of *Pro Rege* may be surprised to find such insightful and articulate authors writing to such a broad audience with pleasingly familiar insights and arguments.

Scholars Stephen Monsma and J. Christopher Soper began this substantive research during the 1980s while colleagues at Pepperdine University; Monsma has since returned to Calvin College as a research fellow at the Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics. In the years since this collaboration began, these scholars, together and separately, have written extensively regarding the intersection of faith and politics in democratic societies. This second edition of their book, renewed with fresh research, valuably reveals changing pictures of reality over a rather long period of inquiry.

To sense the breadth and depth of this study, it is well to know the questions that the authors used for their inquiry. First, how do democratic countries put boundaries around religiously-motivated behaviors that challenge social norms and welfare? The focus here is upon the lines governments draw around the preferences and behaviors of their people that are motivated by religious beliefs. Second, do states use religious beliefs to encourage a common core of civic values to enhance democratic government? Preserving consensus on moral perspectives is a challenging task for democratic governments, and leaders can find capital in the manipulation of religious themes and symbols. Third, when pluralistic religious groups, along with avowedly secular groups, want to engage in social and educational endeavors contemporaneously with governments, what standards of fairness do governments impose? In fact, standards of justice vary in significant ways in different societies.

As the book's subtitle indicates, the authors examine governmental and group practices in five mature democracies: Britain, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. Often critical of the U.S. regarding points of contact and conflict about faith and politics, Monsma and Soper took on the huge challenge to illuminate contemporary practices related to parallel institutions and questions in these other, culturally Christian, democratic societies. They first acquainted themselves with the unique cultural and political histories of each country. Then they focused on actual behavior and practices in each country in regard to the openness for and constraints upon religious exercise. In each country, religion and politics intersect in major ways regarding the administration of education and governmental relations with social service entities, especially nongovernmental ones. Committed to a careful empirical methodology, the authors interviewed a wide variety of scholars, administrators and participant observers active in the substantive areas within the five democracies. The results of these inquiries are the basis for five national reports that can stand on their own merits as case studies of religion and politics. However, their comparative effort focuses attention upon what is more or less commendable in American society.

Citizen rights to free religious exercise are legislatively asserted most strongly in the U.S. and Australia. Germany's courts, more than U.S. and Australian courts, overturn laws that conflict with religious belief and action. In Britain, public attitudes protect religious liberty more than does the law. In the Netherlands, widespread support for religious liberty means that society secures religious rights perhaps better "than almost any other country in the world" (215).

All the democracies do promote consensual values, even those with religious premises, but when the focus is upon schools, the U.S. is unique: "The United States is alone in providing no aid to private religious schools" (219). By contrast, Britain continues to require Christian religious instruction in schools, both public and private. Germany accommodates religious instruction for Catholics and Protestants, but not for Muslims. The Netherlands and Australia best recognize group differences in their public education policy. They "have gone the farthest and for the longest time to ensure that all religious groups are eligible

for state aid, and there is a great diversity of religious as well as secular private schools in both countries” (223).

Governmental support for religious agencies that provide social services is wide ranging in all five countries. Generally, religious agencies run their operations with broad autonomy. However, objections by strict separationists in the U.S. sometimes challenge the autonomy of religious service agencies to a degree not common in the other countries.

With a deep regard for the enduring presence and potential for conflict between religious compunctions and governmental prerogatives, the authors next ponder the two spheres with great respect for each and for both together. Based upon their judgments about justice and insights derived from comparative empirical inquiry, they offer normative suggestions for improving true governmental neutrality in the pluralistic societies they regulate. First, the state must minimally restrict belief communities, including those of secular belief, and then only to fulfill compelling and significant societal reasons. Moreover, such constraints ought not to reflect majoritarian political power unjustly applied. Second, the authors found no acceptable model for the state as a promoter of consensual religious beliefs, but they strongly challenged strict church-state separation. Such separation favors secularly-based organizations to the detriment of those variously faith-based. The Netherlands is again cited as an exemplary state, in that it subsidizes educational, social, and charitable services without religious or secular distinction. The authors argue that government funding for all kinds of religious schools and organizations, as well as secular ones, is an appropriate aspect of governmental neutrality. Moreover, such funding enhances the values of choice, social pluralism, and participatory democracy. The state should set reasonable standards about performance but allow groups autonomy in matters of staffing, admissions, and the character of their services.

In a nutshell, Monsma and Soper advocate that governments achieve religious neutrality. Withholding aid to religious organizations or promoting some semi-consensual civil religion represent flawed approaches. Rather, governments should treat various belief systems, including godless secularism, with mutual respect, civil protection, and evenhanded governmental financial support.

The evolving challenges by Muslims to the cultural and legal contexts of the five nations are only a secondary theme in this study. The authors have offered an overly benign view of the extent to which the growing Muslim presence, especially in Europe, can be accommodated without discriminating against it. A religion with a unique system of *shari'a* law, Islam stands against core cultural values in Germany, the Netherlands, and England (as well as France, not under scrutiny here). Moreover, these European cultures are undergoing what others are calling demographic collapse. They are subject to a rising Muslim onslaught in matters of their disproportionate population growth, economic underemployment, and attendant dissatisfaction, and the radicalization of young males and advocacy for the legalization of Muslim cultural practices. Considering the pathologies of extremism nurtured and exported by some Muslim religious leaders in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim states, the future in the European democracies may be increasingly bleak regarding the issues of political and religious peace. This is more so, I think, than Monsma and Soper recognize.

The authors are to be commended for articulating an orthodox Reformed vision of justice for a broken world, and doing so within the parameters of inferences based upon comparative research. They have written in an appealing way for authentic evenhandedness by governments. They have fairly described governmental successes and failures. Without burdening the text with Reformed terminology, Monsma and Soper have seriously challenged governing elites and their intellectual supporters to actually redeem fallen and sinful structures of contemporary democratic governments. This is exemplary reformational scholarship.

Will this work change prevailing and often unjust practices among governments, particularly those of the American states and nation? That is a lot to ask of a particular piece of scholarship, meritorious though it may be. It is to be appreciated for offering a credible challenge to contemporary beliefs and practices, particularly in the U.S. It may open the minds of students earnest to know the consequences of flawed American policies. This is a book whose lessons speak God's truth to worldly power in credible intellectual terms. Bravo!