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Response to Dr. Charles Glenn

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Editor's Note: This paper is a response to Dr. Glenn's presentation.

A Response to Dr. Charles Glenn



by Paul Fessler

From a historian's viewpoint, Professor Glenn took some risks writing this stimulating comparative history with an eye towards contemporary policy debates. Comparative history often welcomes opportunities for criticism that the scholar is comparing apples and oranges. Academics (historians in particular) can be a timid bunch at times and are often unwilling to paint with too broad of a stroke. Becoming so narrowly focused can allow a researcher to make solid claims about a specific instance. This tendency often leads researchers to neglect examining the larger context and to fail to offer insights beyond narrow disciplinary confines. In light of that tendency, we can be thankful that Professor Glenn did not settle for a safe, short pass but instead completed a long, daring pass. So, without using any more football analogies, I do have some additional

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questions and comments about the paper that focus primarily upon the American historical context.

This paper notes evidence of the *legal* exclusion of religion in public schooling over the past forty years, such as how Christmas trees and Santa Claus no longer appear in most public schools. Other symbols of religion still remaining in the public sphere of the United States such as the phrase "One Nation Under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, and the prayers in Congress and the Supreme Court are also mentioned. One must ask, however, to what degree are these symbols really Christian? Were they ever really Christian symbols? If these symbols are not truly Christian but instead represent a deistic Supreme Being, should Christians really lament their passing? Have these symbols been so co-opted into a benign civil religion that they have become more of a historical recognition than a statement of Christian faith? I agree that we *should* be concerned about the increasing secularizing tendencies in American culture that are driving these current controversies. Perhaps focusing on such symbolism is more of a dead-end issue—one that distracts us from pursuing more effective ways to insert our religious worldview into the public sphere.

Along somewhat similar lines, I'm interested in further clarifying the historical causes behind the secularizing tendencies in American public schools. What is the difference between the legal roots of this secularizing phenomenon during the last forty years and the more deep-rooted influences and trends—those involving surrounding immigrants, Catholicism, and the educational reformers during the nineteenth and early twentieth century? In examining the nineteenth-century roots of this phenomenon, therefore, we find it important to emphasize that the dominant (though typically generalized) Protestant influences over

early American public schooling were initially challenged *not* by those interested in secularization but by contemporaneous Catholic immigrants.

Competing religious worldviews, not deist or secularist forces, originally led public schools to lessen the religious influences within the public schools of the nineteenth century (the dominant anti-Catholic nativism of the period would have rejected the notion that the cause was competing Christian worldviews). In New York City during the 1840s, the Irish Catholics challenged New York City's de-facto Protestant public schools and were active participants. Across the United States during the decades prior to the Civil War, public-school teachers began the day by reading from the Protestant Bible; this practice of laity taking spiritual leadership contrasted sharply with the conservative Catholic approach to Scripture and education. "Bible Wars" raged across many American cities, such as Cincinnati, where, in many cases, the Catholic arguments forced public schools to change their approaches.

The educational reformers that Glenn describes desired a common-school system in order to Americanize and forge a common national identity. These reformers opted to jettison most instances of religion if religion was going to be a point of contention. Binding the increasingly various immigrant groups together around a national identity was far more important to them than holding onto religion. As Glenn notes, an established system of private religious schools threatened the reformers' Americanization goals for the public-school system.

Public-school boosters granted concessions in order to gain wider public support and to increase attendance. With this mindset, many urban public school districts during the nineteenth century, for example, introduced German-English bilingual education programs (half-day German/half-day English) in order to lure German Lutheran and Catholic students from their parochial schools. This practice explains why cities with comparatively small German populations (Indianapolis and Baltimore, for example) adopted German language programs in their public schools. Linguistic diversity could be tolerated and was not seen as a threat, whereas religion (especially Catholicism) was seen as divisive in

the increasingly immigrant-filled nation. Again, the point here is not to blame the Catholics but to clarify that the initial debate over removing religion from public schools stemmed not from secularizing forces but from a clash between competing Christian worldviews.

Still, I believe it is important to identify clearly the forces behind the secularizing tendencies in the period prior to the legal challenges of comparatively recent lawsuits and legal decisions, especially in order to inform the public debate over the role of religion in American public schools in the past. If the policy makers and the American public can see past the faulty notion of an idealized past filled with Christian public schools that only recently became secularized by atheists using legal methods, then perhaps a Christian worldview may be more fruitfully introduced into the public square—not only in our public schools. Prof. Glenn's paper provides us with an excellent point of departure in this quest!