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“Historical Background to Conflicts over Religion in Public Schools”: A Response



by Lloyd Den Boer

I must begin my remarks by sharing my appreciation for Dr. Glenn's presentation and for the work that he has published over several decades. Books like *The Myth of the Common School* and *The Ambiguous Embrace* are invaluable resources to Christians who support faith-based schools. The international breadth of this work is one of the things that I most appreciate about it. In my experience, education in the United States is carried on in a relatively myopic world, especially in relation to questions of school governance and funding. Dr. Glenn's comparative historical work shows us educational systems that are structured differently from our own. He helps

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us see the historical circumstances and human choices that have given us the educational system that we have. Most importantly, he helps us see that what we have could be changed.

Dr. Glenn has argued that the pluralism that characterizes educational governance and funding in the Netherlands avoids a tyranny of the majority and that the United States and other Western countries would greatly reduce their conflicts about education if they would adopt similar systems. I would like to add three footnotes to Dr. Glenn's historical argument by asking three structural questions: (1) what is the proper role of religion in a Christian school, (2) what is the proper role of education in the state, and (3) what is the proper role of the state in education? In each of these footnotes, I will be suggesting—as Dr. Glenn does—that our educational ideals and systems are still laboring under the thrall of nineteenth-century ideologies.

Dr. Glenn has demonstrated conclusively that when the leaders of the common-school movement in the United States argued for non-sectarian education, they were in fact arguing that “school religion” should be a largely deistic form of Protestantism. The common-school leaders were pursuing at least two goals with their support of non-sectarian religion. The one that educational historians most often emphasize is the attempt to provide an educational environment that could embrace students of many faiths. The one that Dr. Glenn appropriately emphasizes is the intent to shape student attitudes and conduct according to the precepts of a rational, common, and moralizing faith. This latter goal in particular suggests that the common-school tradition is not as closely linked to the revolutionary, ration-

alistic individualism of the early Enlightenment, as it is to the conservative reaction that followed the early Enlightenment fervor.

Common-school ideology is a fellow traveler to such things as nationalism, historicism, and the conservative sides of Romanticism. It seems to me that a characteristic mark of the educative thrust of this conservative reaction is its reduction of religious education to education in morality and conduct. While we certainly recognize the important pedagogical insights that arose from the work of educators like Pestalozzi, I would also suggest that the goal of the kind of education that he and others developed was what would later be called “social like-mindedness.” The goal was to develop within children the moral feelings that would encourage them to associate well with others and fit unobtrusively within the society around them. Accordingly, common-school ideology presented biblical Christians with at least two challenges. One was the challenge of opposing a form of Christianity shorn of its root in the redemptive work of Christ. The other was opposing a form of Christianity that reduced the radical, culturally transformative call of the gospel to moralism. When I consider the history and present circumstances of the Christian schools I support, I see that we have met the first challenge well. Whether we have been as faithful in meeting the second, I’m not so sure. When we try to answer the question, “what is the proper role of religion in the Christian school?” much of the language we use speaks of the radical, transformative call of the gospel. Too much of our practice, however, has tended toward the kind of moralistic reduction of the gospel so admired by the common-school leaders.

My second question is, “what is the proper role of education in the state?” Dr. Glenn has argued that public schools have become the “sacred space,” the secular church of the nation. The logic of that development in liberal democracies is fairly direct. If we assume, as liberal democrats did, that nations are primarily made up of masses of individuals, each pursuing his or her own interests, with no mediating associations other than the state to organize society and shape individual behaviors, then we might well believe that liberal democracies face the threat of anarchy on one hand and irrational mob behavior on the other.

We fear these threats all the more if we have within our midst those who are with us but are not really “of us”—the poor or immigrants would be the prime examples. If we have these fears but are also committed to a liberal, democratic political environment, we will look for some agency other than the direct, heavy hand of the state to organize, unify, and control the potential irrationality, anarchy, and diversity of the population. That agency is the public school. Accordingly, it is not a surprise to read Horace Mann’s references to students as children of the state, his arguments that schools can replace prisons, Benjamin Rush’s assertions that schools can make “republican machines” of scholars, the later claims made by the administrative progressives that schools can engineer social harmony, or the current rhetoric that links the economic dominance of the nation to school improvement. By now, the ideology that makes public schools the “sacred space” of the republic may include an oddly sorted amalgam that encompasses theories of human capital, nationalism, egalitarianism, and the desire for a common morality.

Fear appears to play a large role in motivating some Americans to think of public education as a sacred national space. In many differing ways, public-school advocates often argue that without the kinds of common experiences or the social controls or the standardized learning requirements provided by public education, the national center will not hold, and the nation will plunge—depending on the perspective of the speaker—into anarchy, despotism, or poverty. Dr. Glenn’s historical and comparative work is an extremely valuable assurance that educational diversity does not lead directly toward national disorder.

A glance north of the border to Canada can help in a similar way. The attempts of Canadian common-school leaders such as Egerton Ryerson to establish Canadian public schools that could serve students of all faiths and backgrounds on a non-sectarian basis had only limited success. These aspirations foundered on the stubborn fact that Canada was colonized by two nationalities, English and French, with two languages and two kinds of Christian faith, Protestant and Roman Catholic. The only way that the country could achieve sufficient agreement to be a nation was to accept fundamental differences between its

founding cultures. In many provinces, this solution led to the provision of parallel educational systems, one Protestant and the other Roman Catholic. Over time, most Canadian provinces have moved toward government recognition and financial support for all qualifying non-governmental schools. The fears that American public-school advocates raise have not come about in the Canadian setting. Providing a measure of freedom for educational diversity has not led to a collapse of national unity, nor has it destroyed public education.

In fact, I would argue that all schools, including public schools, would benefit from a reduced role in national life. When schools become “the sacred space” of a nation, their role becomes so inflated that they are in danger of losing focus on their educational task. Furthermore, when schools exist in a “sacred space,” failure to meet the public’s expectations is virtually certain. A public that expects too much from its schools too often places the burden for progress toward the nation’s most cherished—and most disputed—dreams on the school doorstep. While we may very well need to raise our expectations for learning in schools, we also need to lower our expectations for what schools can contribute to national life. Schools can affect, but not solve, the social and economic problems that lie beyond their real task and calling in society.

My last question concerns the proper role of the state in education. Dr. Glenn and others have shown how state control of education grew rapidly during the founding years of the common-school movement and continued to grow alarmingly as the first generation of education professionals applied theories of scientific management to education during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century. For good and for ill, federal influence in education exploded during the civil rights era. The tools of control that the federal government developed during that period have now been placed in the service of what is probably the most invasive stance toward education that governments have taken in the United States: the No Child Left Behind Act. It seems to me that the governmental over reach of NCLB is entirely consistent with the ideology set in motion by the nineteenth-century promoters of the com-

mon school. As a result, while many public-school supporters sense that something has gone seriously awry in NCLB, they are at a loss to formulate a foundational criticism. Perhaps this is the historical moment when those of us who stand in the tradition of Abraham Kuyper can serve not only ourselves but the world of public education as well. Schools of all kinds would benefit if, as a nation, we understood that governments have an appropriate but limited role in education.

And that is exactly the task that Dr. Glenn has undertaken so admirably over several decades. I would once again like to express my appreciation for his careful, scholarly work, and for the foundation that it could provide for the work of many other supporters of faith-based schools.