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"THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM: CHURCH AND STATE IN FIVE DEMOCRACIES"

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**“THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM:
CHURCH AND STATE IN FIVE DEMOCRACIES”**

**2nd edition, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.,
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pp. xi + 265, ISBN: 9780742554177

Monsma and Soper turn their attention to the study of religion and politics – “two vital spheres of human endeavor”— in a cross-section of democratic countries (p.1). One of their aims is to promote a better understanding of how liberal democracies grapple with “basic questions” centering on “church-state” relations. These include defining the scope of freedom that can be given to religious groups, determining the extent to which the state can go in fostering the religious “beliefs and traditions” that undergird a democratic order’s shared values, and figuring out ways to “ensure” that activities undertaken by the state provide neither “advantages” nor “disadvantages” for any “one religious group” or any specific belief-system, religious or secular (pp. 3-6). Yet the authors have something more in mind than just describing how contemporary liberal democracies work through these vexing questions. Indeed, another and conceivably more important goal of their work is to offer “new guidance” on how liberal democracies, and especially the United States, can better finesse the challenge of ensuring that states remain “neutral” between religious and secular orientations to the world (pp. 213, 224).

For their investigation, Monsma and Soper select five “religiously pluralistic” nations: Australia, England, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. Because they are all “stable” democracies with roughly “similar cultural Christian heritages” that have followed “distinctly different approaches” to resolving problems emerging from issues of church and state, the authors believe these countries are especially well-suited for their comparative analysis (pp. 12-13). The authors suggest that each of these five countries can be conceived, to a greater or lesser extent, as exemplifying characteristics of one of three different “models” that typify church-state relations in democratic societies. Their first model underscores a “strict separation” between church and state. Of all the countries they study, the United States comes closest to this approach (pp. 10-11). Their second model, which is situated “at the opposite end of the continuum,” is where the church and state work in tandem to promote a “stable, prosperous society” (p. 11). The authors see this established church model exemplified in the pattern of

church-state relations in England. Their third model occupies a position between the other two. This “structural pluralist” model is one where the government ensures equal treatment or support for diverse religious and secular groups in the roles they play in different facets of social life. Monsma and Soper contend that the Netherlands, because of its rich tradition of “pillarization (*verzuiling*)” (pp. 59-63), comes closest to a “principled pluralism” (pp. 84, 85), though they believe that Germany, which has “some aspects” of an established church, and Australia reflect pluralistic features (pp. 11-12).

After delineating the framework that guides their investigation, the authors present their findings on the five different countries, devoting a chapter to each of their cases. The authors begin each of these chapters with a brief discussion of the political, cultural and religious characteristics of the country, followed by a somewhat more detailed historical account of how it has dealt with the issue of church-state relations. They then turn their attention to the more substantial task of describing and analyzing how the country has handled the free exercise of religion and the extent to which it has supported religion and accommodated the involvement of religious groups in the delivery of education and a wide range of social services.

In their final chapter, the authors turn to the second principal aim of their work, that is, evaluating how well the different countries have resolved the “basic questions” of church-state relations within a context marked by increasing religious diversity and growing secularization. Monsma and Soper ultimately intimate that it is the more “pluralistic” model of church-state relations found in places like the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, Australia that comes closest to ensuring “neutrality” on the part of the government. Meanwhile, the authors suggest that it is the “strict separationist approach of the United States, “the least secular of all the countries they studied, that falls short of realizing the goal of “state neutrality” on matters of church and state (p. 231).

Overall, Monsma and Soper provide an insightful, well-written account of the important and complex issue of church-state relations. By situating their discussion within a comparative context, they have shed considerable light on the disparate routes liberal democracies have taken as they have tried to resolve the tension between religious freedom and other important societal needs and interests. Still, while their contention that United States could better realize the goal of “state neutrality” by providing funding for organized religions’ schools and social welfare programs is evocative and deserves consideration, it is, in ways it is not in countries like the Netherlands that have well-established practices of structured pluralism, also at odds with the history, constitutional tradition, and cultural values and beliefs that have played such an important role in shaping this large and incredibly diverse nation’s approach to church-state relations.

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