

Faith-based schools

by [Raymond Rohrer Roberts](#) in the [November 1, 2000](#) issue

*The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-Based Schools and Social Agencies*,  
by Charles Leslie Glenn

A host of proposals on tuition tax credits, charter schools and vouchers are challenging the assumption that Americans should be educated in common schools. For example, in *The Politics of School Choice*, Hubert Morken and Jo Renee Formicola claim that if the various groups working in states from New York to California coalesced around a philosophy, a set of goals and a national spokesperson, they could bring an end to the common school. Perhaps now is the time to consider more deeply what is at stake in common schooling. Few proponents of school choice would make a better conversation partner in this endeavor than Charles Leslie Glenn.

Over the past two decades, Glenn has advocated a system of government-run school choice that would enable parents and teachers to choose schools that fit their religious beliefs and that are capable of forming students' character. His comparative studies between the U.S. system of common schooling and the more pluralistic school systems of Europe, as well as his willingness to take seriously the charges that school choice will undermine such public goods as social cohesion, equality and accountability, make his voice one of the more interesting and compelling in the school choice debate.

In *The Ambiguous Embrace* Glenn expands his argument beyond the field of public education to the nascent movement to use mediating structures, including overtly religious agencies, to deliver government services. He answers the charge that public funding of faith-based schools and agencies will destroy the religious ethos that makes them effective and offers a detailed proposal for publicly funding overtly religious schools and agencies.

Glenn's philosophy of religion gives him a distinct perspective on the problems governments face when they undertake value-laden enterprises, such as public education. He views religion as an essential component of human being and regards

all persons as religious in the sense that they refer to a narrative or worldview to understand the world. Even secular and nonreligious narratives function as a religion by making claims about human nature and the purpose of life, giving meaning to moral commitments and shaping distinctive ways of living. According to Glenn, no one can stand outside of his or her narrative. Since each narrative is as particular as the community that tells it, no narrative can claim to be more universal than another or to be religiously neutral.

Glenn distinguishes between "instruction" and "education." "Instruction" is the relatively "thin" exercise of teaching skills and facts. "Education" is the "thicker," and inherently moral, enterprise of forming human beings. Essential to this formation, he argues, is a view of the human that only narrative can provide. This puts public schools in a double bind. On the one hand, every school, whether it wishes to or not, helps form the attitudes and values of its pupils. On the other hand, government has no narrative sufficiently universal or "thick" to support this endeavor.

Glenn notes that public schools have generally sought to avoid controversy by purging distinctive moral and religious elements from their curriculums. This effort, he claims, has created a morally confused ethos that is incapable of shaping character. He notes that the few schools that do take moral education seriously inevitably arouse the wrath of some "worldview minority." As a counter example, Glenn cites studies demonstrating that the effectiveness of Catholic schools derives directly, in part, from their religious character.

Glenn claims that the religious element that makes Catholic schools effective contributes to the success of other faith-based efforts to modify human behavior, such as Teen Challenge and the Salvation Army. Government, according to Glenn, cannot help someone get on his or her feet, reject drugs, develop will power, or love a child. Faith-based organizations, by contrast, have an ethos that helps them enforce moral codes and demand individual responsibility. This leads him to support government-run school choice and the "Civil Society Strategy" of delivering public services through value-generating and value-maintaining agencies.

Glenn concedes that the strings attached to public funding may not be good for the religious institutions that receive it. He acknowledges that schools and agencies that receive government funds often lose control of hiring decisions, become dependent on professionals whose values may be alien to the institution, and shift the role of

volunteers from providing ministry to providing professional support. Furthermore, they may lose the ability to define their mission and to choose the means to accomplish it, suffer from bureaucratic strangulation and engage in self-censorship. In the current legal climate, he notes, it is difficult to defend decisions (such as hiring a person of the institution's faith) made on a religious basis.

The challenge, Glenn claims, is to find a way to provide public support and oversight to faith-based schools and organizations without stifling the religious element that makes them effective. He encourages government to regulate faith-based organizations through clear outcome and delivery standards, professional qualifications, a system of peer review and government-appointed inspectors. Perhaps most important of all, says Glenn, is to empower parents and clients with vouchers and with the information they need to make informed choices.

Glenn encourages religious groups to refuse funds unless the terms respect their religious identity, even if this means saying no to opportunities to expand their mission. He encourages those who accept government funding to hold on to their vision, to insist on the right to make employment decisions and, if necessary, to stand up to the government. Faith-based organizations will be helped in this if they have strong boards, clarity about the distinctiveness of their approach, professional norms and training that are congruent with their worldview, and peer support.

Glenn's proposal is thoughtful and thought-provoking. There may well be ways that government and faith-based organizations can form partnerships that serve the public good. Whether these partnerships compromise either government or religion will become clearer as experiments proceed.

Less clear is the wisdom of replacing the common school with a more pluralistic system of public education. The growing interest in vouchers seems to mirror the increasing fragmentation of our society and, in particular, the decline in our commitment to the education of all students. In Philadelphia, for instance, urban classrooms make do with \$35,000 to \$45,000 less than their suburban counterparts. Since equality of educational funding directly relates to equality of opportunity, this may be the great civil rights issue of our time. If we move toward a system of school choice, will we close this gap?

One may also question Glenn's claim that meaning is entirely embedded in religious narratives. Although such narratives shape moral reasoning in powerful ways,

meaning cannot be entirely embedded in them because meaning is not just a function of language. Paul Tillich taught us that for language to be meaningful, it must refer to something besides the other words in the language system. Since narratives make claims about the one world in which we live, they cannot be utterly incommensurable. Ever since the apostle Paul spoke about the gentiles as "having the law written on their hearts," the witness of the larger Christian tradition has inclined toward theologies of natural law and common grace. The confidence that nonbelievers can reason morally seems to be a precondition for a religiously plural democratic polity. Without this supposition, it seems impossible not to require some sort of religious test for citizenship or governance.

Can notions of natural law provide some hope that common schools can educate in ways that do not simply offend religious minorities? The difficulty, as Glenn points out, is figuring out how to teach in a neutral way that does not privilege religious agnosticism. Surely common schooling has its ambiguities, but, as Glenn himself acknowledges, providing funds to religious schools has ambiguities of its own.