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Christianity and Moral Identity in Higher Education

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Glanzer, P. L., & Ream, T. C. (2009). *Christianity and moral identity in higher education*

New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Reviewed by Melvin P. Shuster, Ph.D

In their book, *Christianity and moral identity in higher education*, Glanzer and Ream address the issue of moral education in the United States. The authors present three arguments. First, they argue that since that time in America when Christian humanism was the foundation for moral education within higher education, there has been a shift away from what the authors refer to as more fully human approaches to moral education to less human approaches. This transition has occurred, so say the authors, because of the failure to find a universal, nonsectarian form of humanism upon which moral education could be taught. Second, they argue that a more humanistic approach to moral education requires that the institution employ a metanarrative or “story which provides individuals a guiding identity by which to order and understand their other identities, purpose and the overall story of the world” (Glanzer, 2009, p. 25). Finally, they make the case that Christian Humanism provides the best metanarrative for moral education.

The authors’ support for their three arguments is based on a combination of historical research, reasoned argument, case study, and survey-based research. Argument one is based on an examination of the historical changes occurring within higher education in America. Their description and interpretation of these events is consistent with those of other authors such as Marsden (1994), Hart (1999), and Roberts (2000). Argument two is based on reasoned argument. Simply put, they believe that an understanding of and adherence to a set of virtues is needed to be fully human and that the individual can only derive these virtues from a meta-narrative. Their argument is compelling in that it demonstrates how meta-narratives can provide a connection between two traditional foundations for moral education, Aristotelian notions of virtue and the contemporary psychological developmental theories. Argument three is based on case study and survey research. Their case studies appear to be thorough, accurately representing those schools that are under investigation, and insightful, pointing out both the benefits and limitations of each foundation. Their survey research represents an impressive effort that includes the examination of 156 institutions that currently use various foundations for moral education that flow out of the Christian metanarrative. In their arguments Glanzer and Ream do not address some of the more practical issues related to undertaking moral development within the university such as issues related to departmental jurisdiction, the influence of economic pressures on what is taught, and the challenges associated with having faculty from different religious traditions. They do address the issues of coordinating curricular and co-curricular activities and the role of faculty, administrators, and staff as models of the desired moral identity.

The authors develop their first argument initially by presenting the psychological and philosophical concepts necessary for understanding the discussion of moral education in American higher education. Then their historical review and analysis focuses on several key topics, including the struggle to reconcile the Christian tradition’s sense

of morality with those ideals stemming from the Greek and Roman traditions, the place of the Enlightenment and Democratic Identity traditions in moral development, the factors associated with the marginalization of moral education with the resulting increased emphasis on only forming the student in the less human, more narrow area of the student's professional life, the rise and fall of the secular scientific approach to moral education, the removal of moral education from the curriculum and the transfer of the formation of character issues out of the purview of the faculty and the classroom and into the arena of co-curricular activities, and the student development personnel with their emphasis on the cognitive, structural framework for development. They end their historical discussion with a review of the quandary that higher education is now in with the lack of any basis for judging moral claims.

Their second argument makes the case that a more humanistic moral education requires adherence to a meta-narrative that individuals and communities can use as a reference point for understanding their individual identities, setting priorities, and defining virtues and vices. They claim that this meta-narrative or meta-identity must take priority over the individuals' other identities and that each culture develops methods or rituals by which the priorities of the meta-identity are reinforced in the life of the individuals.

The authors' third argument that Christian Humanism provides the best meta-narrative begins with a critique of some current non-humanistic foundations such as Political Moral Formation and orientations that flow out of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as well as foundations that blend traditions. Then their examination of humanistic foundations compares and contrasts Common Ground Humanism, Secular Humanism, and Religious Humanism. Their more in-depth study of Christian Humanism begins with a presentation of their findings from a survey that includes 156 institutions associated with the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities and the Lilly Fellows Program. From these findings, they chose nine schools to investigate in more depth that "demonstrated evidence of a comprehensive interest in moral education (Glanzer, 2009, p. 133). Individually, these exemplars emphasized traits such as faithful service, virtue, social justice and service, virtue and service, and holiness and service. The authors continue by examining the nature of moral identity, moral autonomy, and critical thinking within the context of the Christian Humanism-based moral education. It is noteworthy that they address two of the traditional criticisms of Christian Humanism as a basis for moral education: the claim of indoctrination and the reluctance to promote critical thinking. In the last two chapters, Glanzer and Ream address a perceived weakness with the traditional methods of integrating faith and learning within the Christian Humanism tradition. They believe that these integration efforts should be broadened to include "the redemptive development of humans and human creation" (Glanzer, 2009, p. 183). These broadened efforts should promote the development of the student's Christian identity. Finally, they discuss how this broadened focus on Christian identity could be promoted vis-à-vis a proposed curriculum and by those who oversee the co-curricular arena.

The text provides those dealing with student development several important insights that are worth noting. Specifically, the authors present:

1. An understanding of the broader historical and cultural context surrounding student development in higher education,
2. A well thought-out rationale for adopting a university-wide meta-narrative,
3. Insights on the implications of adopting different foundations for moral development, and
4. Insights on how to construct curricular and co-curricular programs that flow out of the Christian Humanistic meta-narrative.

Overall, I found the book to be an informative and insightful overview of the transitions that have occurred in moral education in higher education in America. The text also provides a valuable rudimentary framework for constructing curricular and co-curricular programs that promote moral education.

Dr. Mel Shuster has 24 years teaching experience in higher education. He holds a Ph.D. in Education from Walden University.

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