Winnifred Fallers Sullivan’s book, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law*, presents a study of the interdependence of law and religion. Sullivan argues that in recent American history, a shift has occurred that has radically changed how institutions access religion. She presents this shift in contrast to the previous ideological separation between church and state. She highlights the ways government establishments are being expected to promote religion as a universal aspect of humanity (12). Religion is not only being integrated into public life, but is now understood in administrative terms. Sullivan highlights this re-configuring of law and religion through a detailed analysis of chaplains in secular institutions.

A distinct aspect of Sullivan’s book is her methodological approach of “legal anthropology of religion” where she uses court documents and statements from a variety of sources, such as government institutions and advocacy groups, to construct a narrative about religion’s new position (15). This allows Sullivan to approach chaplains from a variety of directions. The center of Sullivan’s focus is with what she calls “spiritual governance” which she aligns with Foucault’s concept of pastoral care (17). The five chapters of Sullivan’s book follow the spiritual governance that is implemented in a variety of American institutions through the role of chaplains.

Sullivan begins by addressing chaplains in the United States military and their role in a new program meant to evaluate and address ‘spiritual fitness’ among soldiers. Sullivan explains this new approach by stating, “Religion, or spirituality, is today understood by many in the United States to be both natural and necessary to human health” (22). Therefore, because spirituality has been deemed necessary to human health, Veterans Affairs’ implementation of spiritual wellness has legal support. Sullivan claims that the previous understanding of separation of church and state is reconstituted to allow for government interference of citizens (48).

Within her first three chapters Sullivan introduces her central figure—the chaplain, along with her primary establishments of research—the military, hospitals and prisons. While the traditional role of religious leadership was mainly formed outside the government, “the evolving role of the clergy in the new nation-states since that time has arguably been profoundly tied to the need for imposition of social discipline” (59). Sullivan examines the tensions that have arisen from this new form of ministry, but also from traditions that continue to permeate the institutions and create unfair bias.

Sullivan’s last two chapters explore the constitutional regulations that naturalize religion through her analysis of the *Heins v. FFRF* case. Even though the new jurisprudence is still undeveloped, Sullivan believes that the chaplaincy will be the starting point in law of state support for religion. “Chaplains have become an acceptable form of established religion because they are understood to be necessary to the enabling of this version of the free exercise of religion. Yet that has not entirely robbed them of their capacity to interrupt and surprise the established order” (140). The growing institutional demands for chaplains will bring the “high separatist” era to an end. The *Hein v. FFRF* case addresses the way the government justified promoting one tradition over another. “In other words, government is free to favor religion in general because religion in general is presumed to be noncoercive in a sectarian sense, even beneficial” (166). Sullivan points out that this is a major shift from the separatist
agenda that previously existed within American politics. Religion has been re-cast as a universal necessity for human existence. Under the gist of spirituality, religion is becoming scientifically comprehensible and is no longer darting between the secular divide (171).

Sullivan use of “legal anthropology of religion” allows for an impressive understanding of American law. Similarly, her background in law can be seen with her detailed deconstruction of the legal cases she presents in chapter four. By using the chaplain as her central figure, and examining guarded communities such as the military, hospitals and prisons, she is able to highlight a hidden area where legal interpretations have a direct effect on individuals. Sullivan’s work is a perfect balance that allows it to be accessible to a non-specialist audience while also being insightful to religious studies scholarship. While her text is sometimes organizationally flawed, often darting between topics and introduction new and often disconnected ideas midway through sections, she still is able to build a compelling work. Her final chapter raises some confusing conclusions with her description of a ministry of presence as being both about the pre-cultural aspects of human beings but also described as having its roots in culture. More analysis on ‘a ministry of presence’ in the final chapter would have allowed for more clarity in this section. Similarly, she seems to skim over how chaplains are meant to minister to different traditions. While her work predominantly focuses the how spirituality will affect soldiers, prisoner and patients, it would be compelling to see how these changes in the chaplaincy would interact with different faiths. It seems impossible to say that ministering to the universal spirituality of individuals could be enough.

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