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A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan
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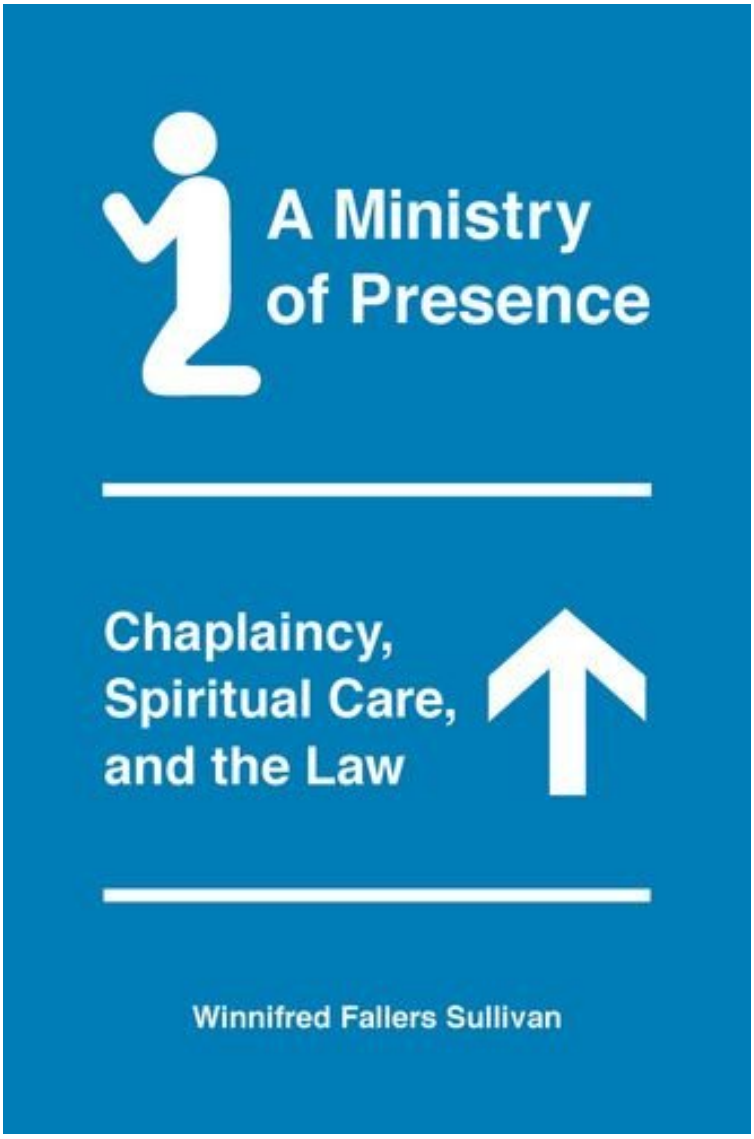

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Winnifred Fallers Sullivan : A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. The New Established Church of American Unitarian UniversalismBy Hugh RockThe specialist focus indicated by the title of this book, which would have led me to pass it by but for a friends recommendation, belies the fact that it raises far-reaching questions about the future direction of

Christianity; about the relation of religion, culture and government; and, most intriguingly, whether the distinction between secular and religious has any meaning.Winnifred Sullivan focusses specifically on government sponsored pastors. In a rapid and discreet expansion these have achieved a ubiquity, invisible and unquantifiable. This wave of employment has been aided by the privatisation of government services. As an introductory example of the new comprehensive scope, Sullivan records an interview with the pastor to the game wardens of the state of Maine, whose service to individuals is simply to be present. Government paid pastors can be found now, not only in the traditional military environments, but in fire services, hospitals, airports, universities, legislatures and care services.These pastors have a specific religious brief which enforces a distinctive professional identity that is in tension with with the sectarian divisions of Christianity. Any hint of denominational proselytization is forbidden. They are obliged to take a position, expounded, for instance, by the army service, that is essentially Universalist or Quaker: each person has to find the truth for himself. A tension arises from the fact that all pastors must be denominationally approved, but the government sets the curriculum for the Master of Divinity Degree and the Clinical Pastoral Education Certificate, which are essential to employment. The government is thus in charge of public theology.This tension is epitomised by the eight hundred evangelical chaplains who sued the navy in the complaint that the navys theology discriminated against them.The constitutionality of this sponsorship has been vigorously contested by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. But, crucially, the FFRF has lost the case. Government pastors are here to stay and set to proliferate. The Supreme Court decided that their sponsorship escapes constitutional prohibition because spirituality is not religious, (a distinction that sociology has found vacuous) and also that the government has a legitimate interest ensuring the availability of free choice of religion.Sullivan, although never stating this explicitly, seems, from a conventional ecclesiastical perspective to take a regretful stance toward this Universalism. Religion is being stripped to the basics, neutralized and naturalized. Faith has become a universalising category, of therapeutic religion, a holy trinity of mind body, and spirit, ambiguously secularist, in which sin and salvation has given way to self-realization and Christian theology has given way to the language of therapy. . .and behavioural psychology.It is, moreover, a politically inspired project. It is a national project of interfaith equity and moral education, civil religion theology, legally enforced secularization, in which orthodoxy has become undesirable. Chaplains have become priest[s] of the secular, support rationalist epistemologies and give blessing to the national endeavour.But there is an alternative, more positive interpretation available. These chaplains are real priests. They are priests of the new religion, as Sullivan notes from other observers, in which pluralism is the new truth claim. This is the new religion in which mid-century pluralist sensibility has given way to an emerging universality. This erases any boundary between religious and secular. It is a religion that emerges naturally from the paradoxical fact that the prohibition of government promotion of religion, embedded the equality of all religions in the constitution. This is the Established Church of American Unitarian Universalism.Sullivans work raises profound questions that sociology and theology have barely touched on. It is a magnificent sourcebook of developments from which to start such an investigation.

Most people in the United States today no longer live their lives under the guidance of local institutionalized religious leadership, such as rabbis, ministers, and priests; rather, liberals and conservatives alike have taken charge of their own religious or spiritual practices. This shift, along with other social and cultural changes, has opened up a perhaps surprising space for chaplainsspiritual professionals who usually work with the endorsement of a religious community but do that work away from its immediate hierarchy, ministering in a secular institution, such as a prison, the military, or an airport, to an ever-changing group of clients of widely varying faiths and beliefs. In A Ministry of Presence, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan explores how chaplaincy works in the United Statesand in particular how it sits uneasily at the intersection of law and religion, spiritual care, and government regulation. Responsible for ministering to the wandering souls of the globalized economy, the chaplain works with a clientele often unmarked by a specific religious identity, and does so on behalf of a secular institution, like a hospital. Sullivan's examination of the sometimes heroic but often deeply ambiguous work yields fascinating insights into contemporary spiritual life, the politics of religious freedom, and the never-ending negotiation of religion's place in American institutional life.

"Thought-provoking. . . . Contemporary chaplaincy programs demonstrate that practices termed 'spiritual' are not unique to the political left or right, and chaplains from a wide variety of institutional backgrounds are grappling with how to provide this 'spiritual care.' A Ministry of Presence makes clear that this grappling has a particular history, and in so doing makes a valuable contribution to the study of American religion."