

Voices from the Next Generation

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FAITH-BASED SOCIAL SERVICES: FROM COMMUNITARIAN TO INDIVIDUALISTIC VALUES

by Stephen Edward McMillin

Abstract. This article argues that a primary, contemporary product of four moments in the history of faith-based social services has been a highly selective and inconsistent use of the notion of human rights by churches and church leaders. Churches still occasionally reference a communitarian sense of human rights and public good but now more commonly use the rhetoric of individual rights to contest specific political positions and social policies in the arena of the social service agencies these churches sponsor. Changing church views of human nature are not sweeping changes, but small changes of degree that still have the power to powerfully reorient social relations. In this sense, churches that sponsor social services increasingly espouse a privatized, economic, and individualistic "Civil Society" in sharp contrast to communitarian notions of social citizenship that formerly better reflected churches' operating ontology.

Keywords: Christian ontology; church mission; faith-based; free market; market-based; social services

Changes in how contemporary churches sponsor faith-based social services suggest that some churches are moving from a communitarian view of human nature to a market-based, individualistic view of human nature. This paper identifies four moments in which this evolution of churches' operating view of human nature can be traced.

First, at the time of the work of the earliest American social workers, there was a movement from charity to justice, in which the rise of the welfare state and the legitimatization of the state as a provider of social services helped

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bring philanthropy and radicalism together (Addams 1910). Radicals were to some extent deradicalized and depoliticized by being brought into the fold of burgeoning public services.

Second, by the time of the Great Society, there was a movement from separation of church and state to church-on-behalf-of-state. The expansion of welfare and social service funding and specific programs to include the poor in new forms of meaningful labor rapidly increased the number of paraprofessional social service workers who were not professional social workers, while faith-based agencies became eligible to receive new government funding sources such as Medicare. Very soon, the bulk of many faith-based agencies' budgets were made up of tax dollars, not church donations.

Third, by the time of Newt Gingrich's Contract with America, a paradigm shift was taking place in public administration of social services, moving away from centralized, federal oversight of human services to decentralized, devolved block grants that introduced enormous variation in how individual states funded faith-based social services. Churches now had to compete against many other providers for funding and market share to remain viable. At the same time, as government became less of a single stakeholder, multiple faith-based groups came forward as stakeholders in an environment where social and political capital was increasingly important. "Charitable Choice" began as a footnote in 1990s welfare reform legislation and, by the 2000s, would flower under both Presidents Bush and Obama as a way for church organizations to receive public funding for new forms of social ministries.

Lastly, the contemporary culture wars in the politics of the past decade have struggled to build on the success of the 1996 welfare reform in reprivatizing and individualizing social welfare. The language of rights is increasingly used in the context of individual employees of church-sponsored agencies refusing to perform certain services. Churches are increasingly focused on political issues such as conscience clauses for church employees and antidiscrimination exemptions for church agencies, and church leaders now adopt the language of the market in arguing against these issues.

This paper argues that a primary, contemporary result of these four movements in faith-based social services has been a highly selective and inconsistent use of the notion of human rights by churches and church leaders, and a turn toward a privatized, economic, and individualistic "Civil Society" (Martin 2004) in sharp contrast to communitarian notions of social citizenship that formerly better reflected churches' operating ontology. The remainder of this paper discusses these four movements in greater detail.

FIRST MOVEMENT: FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE IN THE RISE OF
THE WELFARE STATE

The first movement of changing church views of human nature would be strongly influenced by the work of Jane Addams and the social advances of the Progressive Era. Addams noted that old fears about public social welfare as a plot of socialists and communists were being dissipated precisely because old concepts of religious charity versus social justice were merging and transforming each other (Addams 1910). Addams noted that the state's ability to regulate and inspect public services would put to rest many religious fears that the unworthy would receive aid (Addams 1910, 71).

Three important developments reduced the power of the older notions of religious charity. First, as Addams noted, philanthropists and radicals were coming together in pursuit of similar social welfare goals that were quite broad in scope. Second, the state would be increasingly legitimized as provider and purveyor of social services, so that narrowly targeted religious charity was being transformed into something more closely connected to citizenship and community than simply pious impulses. Finally, radicals for social reform were significantly deradicalized, quickly absorbed into the new public services, and now working side-by-side with others who had much more traditional motivations.

In her own social settlement work, Jane Addams was struck by the need to preserve and protect the religious and cultural identity of new immigrants who entered the melting pot of the early-twentieth-century United States. Addams "saw young people grow ashamed of their elders and old-country ways, she saw a nation indifferent to these young people, caught up in the struggle for livelihood, with no effort made to inculcate in them pride in the basic ideals of the democracy. She believed in the preservation of cultural values" (Elson 1954, 5) for these immigrants, including the diverse religious heritages they brought with them to America.

One of Addams' motives for settlement work was a "revival of the early humanitarian aspects of Christianity" (Elson 1954, 9). However, to a great extent, Jane Addams's moment was a time when the notion of a publicly funded social welfare state, first tenuously breached in the United States via the earliest Civil War and "mother's" pensions (Skocpol 1992), began to establish itself as something distinct from, and even a corrective to, the moralistic conceptualizations of human nature then ascendant among most Christian bodies. Haynes and White (1999, 386) point out the initial cleavage between the earliest social workers and religious ideals, saying of the Charity Organization Societies, "no longer did the COS accept the deterministic religious philosophy of 'having the poor with you always.'" While the notion of worthy and unworthy poor hardly fell away, the constellation of the settlement house movement, the ironically named Charity Organization Societies, the public health movement, and the rise

of child welfare via the Children's Aid Society moved social welfare issues increasingly away from Christian charity and toward conceptualizations of these issues as abiding public concerns (Katz 1986, 137–45; Trattner 1999, 108–62).

Churches' view of human nature at this time remained predominantly a mostly negative one, in which social services consisted of charity that should be given generously but cautiously by the rich lest the morally deficient, unworthy poor should benefit. The rise of modern social work issued a strong challenge to this notion, and churches' views of human nature would become more relaxed and optimistic in the early twentieth century. Jane Addams's call to return to a more primitive form of Christian community would find increasing expression in how churches began to look at social problems.

SECOND MOVEMENT: FROM SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE TO CHURCH ON BEHALF OF THE STATE

The challenge of progressive social reform to religious views of human nature earlier in the twentieth century would issue an even stronger challenge in the tumult of the 1960s, as church-sponsored social services received increasing opportunities to receive public funds. As early as 1946, the Hill-Burton Act would allow private hospitals to receive public funding if they met conditions for public service, such as maintaining emergency rooms in which anyone could be treated. By the early 1960s, religious groups were active in mobilizing for public funding while demanding the right to remain autonomous from state regulation (Coughlin 1961; Kramer 1966). Coughlin (1961, 192) suggested that public social services even tended to compete against private agencies: "The indications are that a harmoniously ordered government is dependent upon private welfare; further indications are that private welfare will not survive without financial aid. In this case, government, rather than squeeze private agencies from the field, would more intelligently aid and strengthen those agencies which perform a public community service. If this is done, legal safeguards must assure the aims and administrative autonomy of private welfare." Coughlin (1961) envisioned a three-part solution: (1) autonomy for private agencies; (2) cooperation among all agencies, public and private; and (3) financial support from the government for agencies that contributed to the public interest.

In addition to religious groups receiving public funds, by the time of the Great Society in the late 1960s, there was an increasing use of paraprofessionals in social services. Pearl and Riessman (1965) were among the first to suggest that the development of paraprofessional jobs in the social services for recipients of social services could improve services. However, the dynamics of the labor market soon militated against this.

The notion paraprofessionals would help improve service quality was challenged by how paraprofessionals were actually deployed and sometimes misused, as well as the obvious cost savings implicit in the lower salaries and benefits paraprofessionals could command (Gartner 1981). Sometimes, this allowed more direct service at a less measured pace than professionals could provide, but sometimes this simply decoupled the paraprofessional role from the work of the professional and the mission of the agency.

There was an ironic twist in churches' views of human nature as seen in faith-based social services at this time. The Second Vatican Council and reform in mainline Christian denominations evinced a view of human nature that was at its optimistic zenith. Humankind was truly seen as the people of God, and the days of churches judging the unworthy poor seemed far behind. However, the rise of Medicare and Medicaid, as well as amendments to the Social Security Act in the late 1960s, radically transformed the business model of human services in an ecumenical fashion. Faith-based social services increasingly looked like other social services, increasingly dependent on government money, and relying on cheaper paraprofessional bureaucracies to deliver services. Churches' views of human nature remained highly optimistic but increasingly were expressed through the sieve of a market model of social services.

THIRD MOVEMENT: FROM WELFARE RIGHTS BACK TO CHARITY

By the time of the Reagan Revolution and Newt Gingrich's Contract with America, welfare had become a bad word. The welfare reform of 1996 formally ended welfare as a right of U.S. citizenship, instead embarking on a paradigm shift in which the role of the federal government was framed as simply doling out block grants to local authorities to spend largely as they pleased. As government became less of a single stakeholder, many faith-based groups came forward as multiple stakeholders in the battle for welfare dollars.

The advent of Charitable Choice under President George W. Bush, in which direct government funding of faith-based social services was first permitted, also had direct influence on the reduction of other public social services. "As part of this shift to faith-based initiatives, legislation from the Bush Administration terminated 65 federally funded programs and reduced 63 major programs within the 2006 fiscal budget" (Allen and Baker 2005, cited in Smith and Teasley 2009, 307). The rationale for this reduction was that the publicly funded programs were not seen as sufficiently evidence-based or able to prove the effectiveness of their interventions, while faith-based agencies were seen as promoting "self-help and change for individuals who have a history of dependency on governmental social welfare programs and services" (Smith and Teasley 2009, 307). Smith and Teasley (2009) note a 2003 document released by the George W. Bush

Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/government/fbci/president-initiative.html>) that “states that government may provide a sense of stability, but faith-based initiatives provide a sense of hope and instill purpose in the lives of people who receive their services” (Smith and Teasley 2009, 307).

Smith and Sosin (2001) caution that these are only “hypothesized benefits” (651) attributed to faith-based social services and that clarifying and testing such hypothesized benefits can be difficult. In their research, Smith and Sosin (2001) find that faith and social service are loosely or strongly coupled depending on the dimension of interest; many of the agencies they sampled are loosely coupled to churches on the level of funding, tightly coupled on the level of authority, and moderately coupled on the level of faith as an assimilated part of the agency’s organizational culture.

After half a century of increasing detachment and separation between professional social work and church groups, the beginning of the twenty-first century saw the rise of government funding draw social services and faith groups closer together than ever before (Cnaan and Boddie 2002). Cnaan and Boddie (2002) note that before Charitable Choice, rules for government contracting and funding for faith-based social service agencies were focused on preserving the secular and community character of the services provided with public funding.

Charitable Choice removed most of the previous IRS requirements, with no evidence offered to support this radical retrenchment of public services into the arms of religion; in fact, research suggests that faith-based social agencies were as likely as secular groups to experience managerial and accounting irregularities and wrongdoing (Gibelman and Gelman 2002). This third moment in how churches view human nature through their social services completes the movement of retrenchment away from the social welfare formulations of the twentieth century and back to the religious charity of the nineteenth century, even in the language used. Churches have become full competitors in the social service market, yet they may use their affiliated agencies to compete from a privileged position, in which they retain the rights of churches to tailor services to their own liking rather than shape them to communal expectations.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: FROM CLIENT RIGHTS TO WORKER AND AGENCY RIGHTS

In the fourth movement of how churches’ views of human nature seem to be changing, churches use their privileged position in the post-Charitable Choice social service market not merely to tailor services to reflect their own preferences, but to use the operations of their affiliated social service agencies to send credal messages to what they seem to frame as a hostile

secular world. At first glance, this might seem odd. As Smith and Sosin (2001) suggest, many faith-based social service agencies are only loosely coupled to their sponsoring churches in matters of finances or even faith, but are often strongly coupled to sponsoring churches in matters of authority. This is the pivotal fourth movement of changes in how faith-based social services have conceptualized human nature, as seen in the culture wars of the past decade. While faith-based agencies may be and often are run in ways very similar to secular agencies, even when recent policy changes have given them increased autonomy to incorporate elements of their faith tradition, it is the agencies' own strong ties to the sponsorship authority of their affiliated churches that permits agencies to be used as arenas for churches to take political positions on matters of social policy that conflict with church doctrines.

One example of this shift in emphasis is at the individual level regarding conscience clauses so that workers can refuse to perform certain job actions, for example, a pharmacist might refuse to fill a prescription for emergency contraception on grounds that the contraception works like an abortion. Churches can directly lobby for policy changes that reduce access to objectionable services, even outside of the agencies they sponsor, and these reductions have demographically measurable consequences in who gets what service (Blank, George, and London 1996; Haas-Wilson 1997; Medoff 2008). Duvall (2006, 1521–22) notes that conscience clause protections have generally been found constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, but cannot elevate religious rights above all other rights or disproportionately burden nonbeneficiaries. Duvall (2006, 1488–89) also notes that certain professionals such as pharmacists would face real dilemmas in exercising constitutionally protected religious freedom via conscience clauses since certain client needs (e.g., emergency contraception) are extremely time-sensitive and also constitutionally protected.

On the other hand, churches today also place a new emphasis on their rights as corporate persons to avoid public policies that they find distasteful, especially antidiscrimination policies regarding sexual minorities such as gays and lesbians. For example, in 1997 Archbishop William Levada of San Francisco, currently Pope Benedict XVI's chief doctrinal officer as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, justified cooperating with antidiscrimination laws by expanding health benefits at his city's Catholic Charities social service agency, cogently noting that "Even prostitutes, alcoholics, embezzlers—I won't rehearse the whole catalogue—need health insurance" (Levada 1997). But in 2010, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C. responded to a similar antidiscrimination law by ordering Catholic Charities to withdraw all spousal health insurance for new employees, saying, "The Catholic Church teaches to pay a just wage. The compensation package you use to pay that just wage isn't defined by the

church . . . Employers have the right to frame compensation packages. . .” (Boorstein and Wan 2010).

The endorsement of the Pope’s current doctrine chief of compromise with controversial social issues such as gay marriage suggests that the issue of how faith-based social services respond to such issues is rarely a truly doctrinal issue but more likely a political issue. Actions such as Wuerl’s point to a strongly market-oriented perspective evident for other churches as well. Churches do not typically have a great deal of direct political control in contemporary democracies, and so to compensate, churches increasingly seem to cluster their political capital in ways that create economic disincentives that achieve creedal goals. This privatized, economic “Civil Society” seems far removed from the notions of social citizenship and the common good that churches held in the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

These four movements point to an ongoing transition from communitarian to individualistic values in churches that sponsor faith-based social services. Despite occasional references to a communitarian sense of the common good, contemporary church leaders more commonly use the rhetoric of individual rights to contest specific political positions and social policies in the arena of the social service agencies their churches sponsor. Changing church views of human nature are not sweeping changes but small changes of degree that still have the power to powerfully reorient social relations. In this sense, churches that sponsor social services increasingly espouse a privatized, economic, and individualistic “Civil Society” in sharp contrast to communitarian notions of social citizenship that formerly better reflected churches’ operating ontology. Under this new value system, faith-based social services can analogously be seen as subsidiary corporations with their sponsoring churches seen as religious conglomerates; the new, individualistic value system creates a corporate synergy, in which the social change that the conglomerate has not been able to achieve through one corporation (congregations and parishes with a large number of faithful church members who work against the public laws on abortion, contraception, and/or homosexuality), it can achieve through another corporation (social service agencies that seek conscience clauses and other exemptions to these same public laws). These individual clauses and exemptions can be repeated across jurisdictions and could grow to have a considerable cumulative effect, but the notion of the public good as an aggregated collection of minority political interests is a stark change from the more optimistic worldviews of churches in much of the previous century.

NOTE

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