

**WORKING DRAFT**

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## **PUBLIC RELIGION AND FAITH-BASED ACTIVISM**

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## Public Religion and Faith-Based Activism

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Alongside the movement toward increased federal support for faith-based social service provision, we have also recently witnessed the dramatic expansion of faith-based political activism in the United States — or at least greater attention being paid to such activism. Though often identified with the Christian right, faith-based political activism has a much longer and broader presence in American history, including advocacy of temperance, the abolition of slavery, Progressive-era urban reform, the rights of labor and of racial minorities, plus long-term activism regarding abortion (both pro and con), the American commitment to Israel, against intervention in Central America and in favor of tax reform and school vouchers. Roman Catholics, evangelical and mainline Protestants, Jews, Mormons, Unitarians, Muslims, Quakers, and the whole variety of American religious movements have at various points emphasized the public voice of their faith traditions regarding political issues facing our society. This prophetic voice of religion represents a key source of democratic dynamism in American life, and to equate political activism with any one religious group or point on the political spectrum is to caricature the American religious and political experience.

If this prophetic role of public religion emphasizes criticizing -- even denouncing -- taken-for-granted political and social arrangements, the equally important priestly role of public religion emphasizes meeting the spiritual needs of members *and* the material and spiritual needs of the wider community. Whether they have focused on children, immigrants, former prisoners, the unemployed, the drug-addicted, or the downtrodden, American congregations have long provided social services and communities of support to those in need. In this paper, I strive to highlight the creative tension between these priestly and prophetic roles of public religion, and argue for the critical importance of protecting the prophetic role even as American society moves toward more extensive public financing of religion's priestly role in social service provision.

Before embarking on that argument, however, I want to make my own stance regarding the faith-based initiative very clear: I am supportive of more extensive public financing of religiously-based social services – but warily supportive, and only under certain conditions. I support the initiative because the neglect of disadvantaged social sectors in current American public policy cries out urgently for redress, and because religious institutions bring particular strengths to bear in that effort; I'm warily supportive not because I am overly concerned about religion's impact on social policy – I think that concern is overblown – but because religious vitality may be undermined unless this policy is pursued very carefully. In the conclusion, I will elaborate on how practitioners, policy-makers, the press, and scholars might best maximize the positive dimensions of this initiative. But first, I'll ask us to pay some close

attention to the priestly and prophetic roles of religion, drawing on theology, social science, and political analysis to inform our discernment.

To begin, I note that we've already taken a first step: To explicitly identify both a prophetic and a priestly role of religion within society is hardly controversial, but it already says a great deal: it carries us well beyond the narrow restriction of religion to a purely "spiritual" role – a restriction found throughout our individualistic culture. More accurately, this step expands the spiritual role of religion to include priestly and prophetic work in addition to the "care of souls." But that is of course nothing new: The language of "priestly" and "prophetic" comes down to us from the Jewish scriptures, in which both roles are centrally constitutive of true worship and true spirituality; similar understandings can be discerned in other faith traditions as well. Thus, that diverse faith communities choose to engage in social service as priestly work, or in political activism as prophetic work, is fairly uncontroversial. That government might choose to foster these roles through funding for religious social service is certainly more controversial, but well within at least the self-understanding of diverse faith communities themselves. Whether such a role for government lies within the self-understanding of a pluralist and democratic nation is of course what the ongoing debate is about.

To jump into that debate, let me first make the case that the prophetic role of religion remains crucial in American society – not just historically, but today in confronting what I consider one of the fundamental crises of American society, the growing gulf between rich and poor, including the abandonment of the poor by government policy and the slippage of the middle class toward economic insecurity. Allow me to sketch one of the more widespread and effective prophetic faces of religion in American life, albeit a rather unknown one:

In most major American metropolitan areas, you will find an organization engaged in what scholars call "faith-based community organizing," typically affiliated with one of four national networks: the Pacific Institute for Community Organization, the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Gamaliel Foundation, or DART. Under the rubric of names like the Washington Interfaith Network, ISAIHAH in Minnesota, the San Francisco Organizing Project, Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, or PACT in Miami, in some 150 cities around the country members of churches, synagogues, and some mosques are engaged in faith-based community organizing (Hart 2001; McRoberts 2003; Osterman 2003; Warren 2001a; Wood 2002a). In many settings, these are among the most effective organizations advocating for poor to middle-class communities around such issues as economic development, funding for public education, police reform, affordable housing, access to medical care, and living wage laws. They do so by drawing on the social networks and leadership skills embedded in African American, Latino, white, and multiracial congregations to build what they call "non-partisan power organizations" to negotiate with political and economic elites. In order to argue for the importance of faith-based organizing within

contemporary efforts to deepen democracy, allow me to briefly invoke three aspects of the field: its sheer scale, its role in building social capital in urban America, and the issues it has addressed.

*The scale of faith-based organizing:*

Faith-based community organizing (FBCO) is a national phenomenon with broad reach into American congregations and communities. As of 1999, when the only national study of the field was done (Warren 2001b; Wood 2002b), there were 133 full-fledged organizations in the FBCO field, active in most states across the country, including most of the crucial electoral battlegrounds nationally (today there are some 150, in 38 states and the District of Columbia). A typical FBCO organization had a budget of \$150,000 per year (2002 dollars) and 30 member institutions, 27 of which are religious congregations. But some have more than 100 institutional members. The FBCO field incorporates a large number of institutions, with about 4,000 official institutional members. Of these member institutions, about 3,500 (or 87.5%) are religious congregations, while 500 (or 12.5%) are non-congregational institutions like unions, schools and other community organizations. With the exception of the labor movement, this appears to represent the broadest and best-articulated movement for social justice in America today – at a time of dramatic polarization between the rich and poor in U.S. society (Krugman 2002).

Leadership participation figures provide a further entry point for assessing the scale of faith-based organizing: Over a typical eighteen-month period, FBCO as a field draws some 24,000 people into a significant leadership role – defined by survey respondents as “core leaders” actively involved in day-to-day organizing efforts. Typically, these core leaders come from member institutions (most often religious congregations, but also labor unions, schools, and community organizations), from which other participants are also drawn. Each year, some 1,600 of these leaders attend multiple-day, network-sponsored national events that provide training in the principles and strategies of the faith-based organizing model. Finally, the field employs some 460 full-time professional organizers.

These numbers suggest at least some *potential* for FBCO to play a significant role in the public sphere. But we need to have some measure of the degree to which FBCO organizations actually project power in their local political arenas. Wood and Warren (Wood 2002b) assess this by looking at the highest reported attendance at a political action sponsored by respondent organizations. Though raw numbers such as these do not directly measure these organizations’ full political capacity, they are a rough measure of one key determinant of that capacity: their *mobilizing* capacity. These maximum attendance figures fall into the following categories:

**Table 1: Projecting Power: Highest attendance at political actions sponsored by local organizations:**

<u>Maximum reported attendance at a local political action</u>	<u>Number of FBCO organizations (n = 100)</u>
1,000 or more (max = 10,000; mean = 1,807)	27 organizations
400-900	36 organizations
120-350	28 organizations
less than 100	9 organizations

We interpret these data as follows: in virtually any city in the country, an organization that can mobilize more than 1,000 people to a public action with a focused agenda and reasonably skilled leadership can be expected to have powerful influence upon local political decision-making at least on some issues; about a quarter of FBCO organizations report this level of political capacity. Organizations with the political capacity to mobilize many hundred supporters around a focused policy agenda can likewise be expected to carry significant influence upon local political decision-making; more than a third of FBCO organizations report this level of political capacity. We would expect the political capacities of groups mobilizing up to a few hundred supporters to depend greatly on other factors. In any case, these data suggest – though they do not prove – that through FBCO organizations, American religious congregations operating in a prophetic mode can and do project quite significant influence up into the decision-making processes in municipal governments.

*Social capital and faith-based organizing:*

A second aspect of faith-based community organizing involves its contribution to generating social capital in American society. As Putnam and others have argued (Putnam 2000), most forms of social capital in America have eroded in recent years, and this has profoundly undermined American society. Especially important for our purposes is the distinction between bridging and bonding social capital (Warren 2001c), for particularly scarce is “bridging” social capital – ties that link people and groups with those that are unlike them. Whether we consider cross-racial ties, ties between adherent of differing religious traditions, or ties between recent immigrants and more established Americans, such links are scarce in the contemporary United States. The resulting balkanization of our communities weakens American democracy.

Religious congregations appear to be effective in building up “bonding” social capital within their communities – indeed, this is part of what makes them effective bases for faith-based organizing (Wood 2002; Warren 2001). Federal funding for religious social service provision may help strengthen this important role of religious congregations in serving their communities. But on their own, congregations

do not do nearly so well in building bridging social capital – no shame there, as neither do most of our other institutions.

In this regard, faith-based organizing comes into its own: it appears to be unparalleled in its capacity to build social capital that bridges races and ethnic communities, religious traditions, and the immigrant-native divide.

**Table 2: Racial characteristics for all FBCOs combined:**  
(all figures are percentages)

Percentage of member institutions that is predominantly:	
Asian	1.29
Black	35.03
Hispanic	20.89
Native American	0.22
White/Anglo	36.06
Interracial	6.49
Immigrant (of various race)	10.81

The FBCO field is quite diverse racially in its institutional membership, with white, black and Hispanic institutions all well represented. As revealed in Table 2, institutions whose membership is predominantly white make up 36% of all member institutions. Predominantly black institutions comprise about 35% of institutions, and predominantly Hispanic institutions about 21%. This tri-racial structure alone makes the FBCO field quite exceptional within American civil society, so often divided along racial lines.

But a second measure of diversity is critical because, although FBCO is a national phenomenon, it does not operate as a unified field. The primary locus of political action in FBCO is local, and so it is important to know whether it bridges sectors *within* the local arena, or only in the aggregate. If we examine the racial composition of the local FBCO groups within the field (Table 3), we find that, by and large, FBCO groups do work to forge multiracial ties within their local political arenas.

**Table 3: Racial diversity within local faith based organizations**

	<u>Number</u> (N = 82)	<u>Patterns within this category*</u>
<u>Monoracial</u> (100% one group)	9	3 White 3 Black 3 Hispanic
<u>Racially dominant</u> (one group >80%)	4	2 White dominant <sup>a</sup> 2 Black dominant
<u>Racial majority</u> (65%-80% one group)	21	14 White dominant <sup>b</sup> 6 Black dominant <sup>c</sup> 1 Hispanic dominant <sup>d</sup>
<u>Biracial</u> (only 2 groups >15%)	35	22 White/Black <sup>e</sup> 8 White/Hispanic 3 Black/Hispanic 2 White/Asian
<u>Multiracial</u> (3 or 4 groups >15%)	9 with 3 groups >15% 2 with 4 groups >15%	9 White/Black/Hispanic <sup>f</sup> 1 White/Black/Hispanic/Asian <sup>g</sup>

\*Note: Secondary group listed when >=10%

<sup>a</sup> Listed as dominant/secondary group, the patterns are: 1 white/Hispanic, 1 white/black & interracial, and 2 Black/white

<sup>b</sup> Listed as dominant/secondary group, the patterns are: 6 White/Black, 3 White/Hispanic, 2 White/Black & Hispanic, 2 White/Black & Interracial, and 1 White/Interracial

<sup>c</sup> Listed as dominant/secondary group, the patterns are: 3 Black/White, 1 Black/Hispanic, and 2 Black/White & Interracial

<sup>d</sup> Listed as dominant/secondary group, the pattern is: 1 Hispanic/White

<sup>e</sup> Listed in order of concentration: 12 Black/White, 10 White/Black, 4 White/Hispanic, 4 Hispanic/White, 3 Black/Hispanic, 1 White/Asian, and 1 Asian/White

<sup>f</sup> Listed in order of concentration: 3 Black/White/Hispanic, 2 White/Black/Hispanic, 2 Black/Hispanic/White, 1 White/Hispanic/Black, and 1 Hispanic/Black/White. Groups include Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American and White. Interracial group excluded from analysis. If groups had equal proportions, then listed in alphabetical order.

<sup>g</sup> Listed in order of concentration: 1 Asian/Black/Hispanic/White and 1 White/Hispanic/Asian/Black. If groups had equal proportions, then listed in alphabetical order.

Note: two cases were indeterminate: 1 in which 11 of the 12 participating groups were interracial; 1 in which 50% of the participating groups were white and 43% were interracial.

Prophetic religion as represented by faith-based organizing also builds significant cross-religious social capital. Nationally, the FBCO field bridges religious institutions across three main categories: Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants and historic Black Protestants. As Table 4 shows, Catholics make up about 33% of the congregations. A variety of mainline Protestant denominations make up another third

of the congregations in membership, including United Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists (UCC). Baptists (including Missionary) hold about a 16% share. From our observations of the field and other reports, we surmise that the Baptists are largely African American. If we include the Methodist Episcopal and Other Black Protestant group with Baptists, then historic black Protestant denominations hold about a 20% share. There is some wider religious presence as well, with Jewish, Unitarian-Universalist, and black evangelical (mostly Church of God in Christ) congregations each constituting about a 2% share of the total. More widely, it becomes a story of religious absence, however: non-Black evangelicals, Muslims, Mormons, Buddhists, and other religious groups largely participate only in very isolated instances or not at all.

**Table 4: Religious Characteristics of member institutions for all FBCOs combined**  
(all figures are percentages)

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Percentage of all member institutions that are:	
Congregations	87.5
Noncongregational institutions (NCIs)	12.5
Percentage of member congregations that is:	
Jewish	1.95
Unitarian Universalist	2.09
Other non-Christian	0.62
Catholic	32.92
Episcopalian	6.54
Lutheran	7.89
Presbyterian	5.71
UCC	3.52
United Methodist	8.90
Other Protestant	0.83
AME, CME, AME Zion	2.70
Missionary Baptist	1.49
COGIC	2.16
Other Black Protestant	1.49
Baptist (non-Missionary)	14.81
Theologically Conservative Protestant	2.84
Other Christian	3.52

But again religious diversity at the *local* level matters more. Table 5 shows the religious make-up *within* the 93 respondent organizations, grouped according to their religious homogeneity or diversity. It shows that the large majority of FBCO groups bring at least two, if not three, major religious groupings together at the local level. There is a modest degree of wider religious diversity beyond Catholic/Mainline Protestant/Black Protestant participation as well. In 20 of the 93 organizations at least 9% of FBCO member congregations were non-Christian; and in 12 of the 93 organizations at least 9% of FBCO member congregations were traditionalist Protestant. Though there are clearly weaknesses here — especially the absence of Muslims and evangelicals other than African-Americans — faith-based organizing builds significant cross-religious social capital.

**Table 5: Religious Diversity within Local Faith-Based Organizations**

	<u>Number</u> (N = 93)	<u>Main patterns within this category</u>
<u>Monoreligious</u> 100% one group	3	All Roman Catholic
<u>Dominant</u> >60% one group	13	7 Roman Catholic dominant 4 Mainline Protestant dominant 2 historic Black Church dominant
<u>Majority</u> 50-60% one group	11	4 Roman Catholic majority 5 Mainline Protestant majority 2 historic Black Protestant majority
<u>Bireligious</u> 2 groups > 20%	35	20 Catholic/Mainline 9 historic Black/Mainline 4 Catholic/historic Black 1 traditionalist/historic Black 1 Mainline/non-Christian
<u>Diverse</u> 3 groups >20% <u>or</u> 4 groups > 15%	31	9 with largest group Mainline 9 with largest group Catholic 4 with largest group Historic Black 9 with two essentially equal primary groups (mostly historic Black, Mainline, or Catholic)

Religious categories defined as follows:

monoreligious: all congregations from one religious group

dominant: more than 60%, but less than 100%, of congregations from one religious group

majority: 50-60% of congregations from one religious group

bireligious: more than 20% of congregations from *each* of two religious groups, but none more than 50%

diverse: more than 20% of congregations from *each* of three religious groups, *or* more than 15% of congregations from each of four religious groups

Finally, the FBCO field also incorporates a significant number of immigrant communities. Almost 11% of all institutions that are members of FBCO are predominantly immigrant in composition, mostly from Latin America or the Afro-Caribbean area.

Thus, religion in its prophetic mode — exemplified here by faith-based community organizing — contributes powerfully to building bridging social capital in America across races, across religious groups, and across the divide that sometimes isolates immigrants from the societal mainstream. Just how powerful that contribution can be is best seen in the kinds of issue work done by these organizations.

*Issue work in faith-based organizing: Advocacy by grassroots communities*

In the 1999 survey, faith-based organizers were asked an open-ended question regarding “what kind of issues” their organizations had addressed in the last two years. Their most common responses grouped into the following broad categories:

Education/Schools:	Public school reform, after-school programs, teacher home visits, site-based management, reading in schools, in-school suspension policy, tutoring, charter schools, safe schools
Economics:	Economic development, living wages, human development tax, worker rights, workforce development, immigration rights, first source hiring, sweatshops, minority hiring
Housing:	Affordable housing, senior housing, <i>colonias</i> (poverty housing in border states; mostly work on deed conversion, water access, and waste removal)
Policing:	Community policing, gang violence, drugs and crime, anti-police-abuse, more police presence, restorative justice, gun control, police relations
Healthcare:	Expanded access to healthcare for children, working families and immigrants; public health infrastructure

These issue areas suggest that FBCO political influence *might* be focused on structural issues affecting large numbers of people – at least, phrases such as “public school reform,” “economic development,” “living wages,” “worker rights,” “immigration rights,” “minority hiring,” “access to healthcare,” and “public health infrastructure” might plausibly refer to such structural reform efforts. While these issue areas are vague enough that they might instead represent low-level work requiring only a minor degree of political power, we know from case studies that many FBCOs indeed engage in structural reform (Hart 2001; McRoberts 2003; Osterman 2003; Warren 2001; Wood 2002). Since until recently scholars have tended to research the more successful and advanced cases of FBCO, their findings should be interpreted not as representative samples of the field’s political influence, but rather as showing the field’s general potential.

Case studies of faith-based organizing in Texas and California are especially illuminating here.

FBCO has attained some of its most significant influence in these populous, politically-influential states. In Texas, eleven local organizations in the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) network have worked together since the early 1980s to influence policy at the state level (Warren 2001). In its early campaigns, the Texas IAF provided the grass-roots muscle to push the legislature to adopt a \$2.8 billion increase in funding to poor schools as part of a broader education reform package. The network proceeded to win a \$70 million indigent health care package of state aid to counties, representing the first time the state of Texas had made a commitment to provide health services for the poor. In the late eighties, the Texas IAF won a \$100 million state bond package to fund water and sewer services for the *colonias*, America's equivalent of shanty-towns along the border with Mexico. In the nineties, the state network moved to launch more sophisticated reform programs, featuring an Alliance Schools initiative with the state department of education at over 100 schools across the state. In the fall of 1999, the organization unveiled its human development program, a new initiative that attempts to place a unifying umbrella over a wide array of issues: job training, living wage ordinances, school reform and after-school programs, citizenship classes and voter registration, health care and neighborhood safety.

In California, faith-based organizing efforts in 18 cities by the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) have since 1997 collaborated on the "PICO California Project," working to knit together a vehicle for political influence on statewide issues (Wood 2002). Initial efforts focused on public school improvements and resulted in \$50 million in new after-school programs, many in poor school districts or individual schools located in poor areas. The California Project also played a key role in a successful 1998 bond initiative that provided \$9.2 billion for new school construction and repairs. In 1999, the organizations gained \$15 million in direct state funding for a new program of home visits by teachers in 400 public schools; this program has subsequently been refunded annually and become a national model for closing the gap in parental involvement between middle class and poor/working class parents. In May 2000, the organizations turned their attention to health care access, organizing a multiracial gathering in Sacramento of 3,000 people from across the state, pushing for state-sponsored health insurance for the uninsured working poor (some 7 million Californians) as well as for some 1.5 million California children qualified for state coverage but unenrolled due to cumbersome procedures and poor information. They gained the public endorsement from the heads of both houses of the California state legislature and, ultimately, the governor. As of this writing, they have won \$50 million in new funding to clinics (which provide most health care for indigent Californians) and got the legislature to establish a new state insurance program for the working poor. Although \$250 million in funding for the latter, plus \$500 million in matching federal funds, were postponed until 2003 due to the costs of the California energy crisis and lost revenue from a weakening economy, if ultimately funded the effort appears to be on track to become the largest single expansion of health care access in decades.

The prophetic role of religion — as exemplified here by faith-based organizing — thus remains central to the political dynamism of American society, due to its broad scale, role in generating bridging social capital, and issue work in advancing democratic interests in a polarized society. Thus, protecting the prophetic role of religion represents an important public policy interest for religious, political, and other institutional leaders as we broaden federal funding of religious social service providers.

*Prophetic and Priestly Religion: Potential contradiction within a creative tension*

That federal funding for social service provision might undermine this prophetic role of religion is not obvious — after all, religious traditions have sustained both roles in diverse societies and times. To understand the potential contradiction, we must recognize that, in order to attain the kind of political capacity and public profile outlined above, faith-based organizations have placed political conflict and building organizational power at the center of their organizational cultures. That is, these organizations have achieved their significant gains by negotiating directly with political and economic elites — and they have gotten to that negotiating table not through the good will of elites but by building power internally within their organizations and entering into the conflictive political arena, insisting that their voices be heard and demanding access to the negotiating table.

Government funding of congregationally-based social services might undermine the ability or willingness of congregations to engage in that kind of conflict. The prophetic current of religion might be eroded subtly: Congregational energy and capacity are never infinite, as anyone committed to a faith community surely knows. That limited energy and capacity might be gradually diverted away from political engagement and advocacy for long-term public policy change toward the day-to-day struggles to staff and run social service programs. Or the relations between congregation members of differing social status might shift from that of relative peers – all equal in the sight of God, at least in principal – to the openly hierarchical patron-client relations typical of social service agencies, with clients presumed to be “in need” in ways that agency staff are not.

Or the prophetic current of religion might be eroded more directly: In cities where political patronage dynamics are strong, political incumbents may explicitly or implicitly tie ongoing social service funding to a pastor’s political support, and cut off funding for congregations that support more prophetic challenges to political initiatives or that too-vociferously demand a public voice. At present, we do not know whether these dynamics are occurring, but ongoing research and caution are surely justified.

Whether subtle or not, such political strings on public monies are to be expected, unless funding programs for the faith-based initiative are administered in ways that create firewalls against them. Not being a public policy expert, I will forego speculating on how such firewalls are best built, and content myself with highlighting the need for them. Closer to my expertise is the question of how congregations

can best understand their prophetic and priestly roles, and thus most effectively serve their members and the wider community. Even here, congregational decisions on whether to solicit government funding and how to combine this with their more prophetic ministries, of course lie in the hands of religious leaders; but I would at least like to offer some thoughts for consideration.

*The Role of Congregations: Organizing, Service, and Spiritual Nurture*

Fifty years ago, the Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr offered some categories useful for congregations and political leaders as they seek to understand the societal role of religion (Niebuhr 1951). Niebuhr outlined five models for how religion relates to its surrounding social milieu, using the shorthand of the relationship between “Christ and culture.” I here adopt his categories, but translate them for our pluralist setting. In Niebuhr’s first category, what he calls “religion against culture,” religion stands in a relationship of one-dimensional opposition to regnant social arrangements, condemning institutional patterns considered morally unacceptable and thus rejected within a given religious ethic. The grave dangers of such a stance can be seen in the recent attack on the World Trade Centers, in that the contemporary rejection of modernity by some Islamic fundamentalists is a prime example of religion-against-culture. But we should not neglect the more positive dimension of religion against culture, such as the more limited case of the Latin American Catholic bishops’ rejection of torture and military dictatorship as “institutionalized sin,” or monastic critiques of the cultural excesses of consumerism. A familiar example of contemporary religion-against-culture can be seen in the pro-life movement’s crusade against abortion access in America. Whether or not one agrees with any particular such stance, religion against culture represents a particular kind of religious critique of society, one which sometimes increases our democratic dynamism.

Second, religion can essentially sacralize regnant social arrangements, becoming the “religion of culture” by uncritically affirming current institutions. For those of us living in the most powerful nation in history, this is perhaps the most dangerous role for religion to play, for it smacks of idolatry and risks baptizing every national initiative – even imperial ones – as God’s will in the world. The religion-of-culture is indeed dangerous, but not at all unheard-of: We see it at work historically in the racist theologies of some antebellum American churches and in the pro-apartheid South African churches; currently in simple-minded baptism of national jingoism or of “tax cuts” as a theological virtue. A positive example can be seen in how many faith communities have embraced “democracy,” “human rights,” and – more controversially – “environmental stewardship” as worldwide societal ideals.

The other three patterns for the relationship of religion and culture are all attempts to synthesize them. Niebuhr notes the vast historical importance of “religion over culture” in the medieval Catholic church and its great synthetic theologian Thomas Aquinas, but argues such a synthesis was no longer

possible by the 1950s. Yet something like this religion-over-culture stance underlies the restorationist project of the contemporary papacy under John Paul II. The key to this stance lies in a religious tradition seeing itself in an overarching role as guide and overseer for cultural development. Conservative evangelicals, Catholics, and – in an ironic parallel, sometimes the secular cultural elite – all sporadically appear to aspire to such a role.

Fourth, religion sometimes stands in a dualistic relationship with its cultural milieu, which Niebuhr called “religion and culture in paradox” in reference to one of its taproots in the classical theology of Martin Luther. For Luther, the “two kingdoms” of earthly life and a heavenly realm stood in paradoxical relationship to one another, with believers emphasizing the vast disjuncture between God’s perfection and the corruption of all humanity. Though this stance has provided rich resources for human communities struggling with the tensions between religious ethics and human pragmatics, it is ultimately unable to fathom the actual relationship between them, or to connect them systematically. Such a position has strong theological roots in a variety of religious traditions, but typically proves unsatisfying to believers whose spiritual experience calls them to ethical or political activism to reform the world.

Finally, religion sometimes seeks self-consciously to transform its cultural milieu by simultaneously embracing some aspects of current institutional arrangements and criticizing or rejecting others. This stance of “religion transforming culture” requires a complex set of interpretive skills from religious leaders, and is often misinterpreted by outsiders more inclined to one-dimensional condemnation or affirmation of prevailing cultural norms. As the public voice of a given faith tradition shifts from a tone of affirmation regarding one issue to a tone of criticism or condemnation regarding another, hardliners in the camps advocating religion-of-culture or religion-against-culture will see waffling or opportunism. Thus, the Catholic Church’s simultaneous public advocacy against abortion and against the death penalty, or in favor of democratic capitalism and of workers’ rights and a living wage, confuses many. Likewise, moderate voices within the Islamic tradition get little public hearing as they seek to articulate a Muslim vision of democracy while also questioning modern consumerism and American foreign policy. Throughout history, moderates have often been impaled by hardliners.

Let me note frankly that, like Niebuhr, I hold a bias in favor of the religion-transforming-culture stance. But in fact all five patterns are legitimate public stances for religion to take at certain moments, under criteria that the religiously-committed must ultimately assess for themselves (albeit they do so best when they listen to critical outsiders). Most importantly for our purposes here, religious communities must be free of constraints on when they can operate in each mode. Therein lies an important danger of the current faith-based initiative: it may weaken congregations’ ability or willingness to operate in all of these modes, especially those more critical of current societal arrangements. Receiving large amounts of government money risks domesticating the voice of religion, tying it too closely to prevailing institutions

and cultural norms. As congregations and denominations navigate their way toward government funding for their social service, religious leaders will do well to keep this danger on their radar if we are to sail clear of its shoals.

We can thus discern four kinds of potential tensions between prophetic organizing and priestly social service provision that might be exacerbated by the faith-based initiative: First, receipt of government money may make religious leaders less willing to risk alienating political patrons. Second, any deep investment of the human resources of congregations into social service provision may undercut potential investment of those resources in the prophetic ministries that congregations have long seen as part of their calling. Third, the relations of (relative) peer accountability that develop within at least some congregations may be overtaken and replaced by the patron-client relations characteristic of social service agencies. Finally, where resources are scarce and congregations are in high competition for adherents, as in the dense urban “religious districts” studied by Omar McRoberts (McRoberts 2003), federal dollars might tame or simply divert the prophetic religious voices that have historically been among our most articulate champions of social justice: those of the African American church tradition.

Given these dangers to congregations’ vigorous pursuit of their prophetic calling, some articulate religious voices have spoken out against the faith-based initiative. Yet the needs of disadvantaged sectors of American society cry out for redress — redress from within their own communities, from government, and from all of us. How, then, might we best proceed? Reasonable measures would include the following:

- \* Religion’s prophetic role should be protected from political interference, with such protection codified in the enabling legislation for the faith-based initiative.
- \* Countervailing funding for prophetic ministries should be institutionalized, to provide a counterweight to federal funding for priestly religion. Since, by its very nature, government funding of prophetic ministries blunts their cutting edge, such funding should not come from government but rather ought to be institutionalized in denominational policy and the funding guidelines of major funders of social initiatives such as the Ford, Rockefeller, and Kellogg Foundations and the Open Society Institute, Pew Charitable Trusts, and Lilly Endowment.
- \* Institutionalized separation and codified autonomy of federal funding decisions regarding the faith-based initiative should be institutionally separated from the political apparatus of local, state, and federal administrations, and the autonomy of those decisions enforced legally.
- \* The societal pay-off to justify running these dangers should include a *net positive gain* for social service funding. That is, major new investment in social services should be made, as resources become available during the next economic recovery, to be sure that new faith-based providers don’t simply undermine existing providers (secular and religious).
- \* Most broadly, the faith-based initiative should be seen as one aspect of a much broader effort to

rethink and redesign the relationship between the market economy and the rest of American society; a thoroughgoing critique of “market fundamentalism” – the notion that unrestrained markets are *always* the best way to allocate resources – should lead to the transfer of national assets from the economy narrowly understood to societal institutions less tightly embedded in markets.

Though I will not attempt to defend all these measures here, I think they represent the kind of direction in which lightened policymakers should be thinking about leading American society in the future.

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