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Robert Wuthnow: Saving America?

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Why “Faith-Based”? Why Now?

The question of faith-based social services emerged as a major policy debate in the waning months of the twentieth century. The debate started in the mid-1990s as part of the Clinton administration’s efforts to reform the social welfare system. The resulting 1996 welfare reform legislation included a provision known as Charitable Choice. This provision made it possible for churches and other religiously oriented service organizations to receive government funds more easily. As a result of this provision, service agencies and government officials started paying more attention to the possible contribution that religious organizations could make to the needs of lower-income families and other disadvantaged or at-risk persons. During the 2000 presidential campaign, the discussion intensified. The Bush administration subsequently set in motion a number of initiatives to further highlight and support the role of religious organizations in social welfare provision.

The questions raised by the debate about faith-based social welfare provision focus chiefly on what faith-based organizations are doing, how well they are doing it, and whether their activities should be supported with government funds. Few solid answers have been given. The more researchers have tackled these questions, the more they have come to realize that important conceptual and empirical issues must be addressed before definitive answers will be forthcoming. We need to know more clearly what we mean when we talk about “faith-based” organizations. We need to know what the relevant comparison groups are. And we need to be clear about how we are assessing organizations’ effectiveness in carrying out their programs.

The recent discussion about faith-based social services, though, is part of a larger debate about the future of civil society in the United States. That debate focuses on the quality of our life together as citizens. It concerns

whether the American public is willing to do its part to help one another and it includes questions about the role of trust and compassion in public life. Above all, it is a debate about inequality: whether civil society only works well for the affluent middle class or whether it also works well for lower-income families. Religion is an important part of this debate. The United States has ten times as many houses of worship as it does post offices. Far more people participate in religious organizations each week than in any other civic association. Nearly all Americans attest to believing in the supernatural and at least five of every six Americans claim to have a religious preference. Religion is increasingly being looked to by public officials to help solve community problems. Possible remedies for poverty, crime, drug abuse, homelessness, and many other social concerns have been linked to faith communities. Yet we have few answers about what religion is actually doing or what it may be capable of doing.

In this volume I present new evidence from more than a half-dozen major research studies that I and others have conducted in recent years. This evidence addresses many of the questions that have remained unanswered about the role of religion in providing social services and in turn contributing to the well-being of civil society. How many local congregations have formal programs to assist needy families in their communities? What kind of programs are these? How much money is spent on them? How well do congregations take care of their own? Do members develop personal relationships that help them in times of trouble? Are they challenged to help others? When people *are* challenged, do they get involved in volunteer activities? What kind of volunteer activities are these? Who is served and what social ties are forged by volunteers? How many specialized faith-based service agencies are there? How are they organized? What role does faith play in them? Which ones are most effective? Do lower-income families have connections with religious organizations? Who seeks help from faith-based organizations? How do they feel about the help they receive? Are religious organizations helping to promote trust? Are they helping to spread messages about love and compassion?

The answers that emerge demonstrate that American religion *is* playing a positive role in addressing the needs of lower-income families and that it is, more broadly, contributing to the strength of civil society. Yet it would be an exaggeration to conclude that religion can save America from the problems it presently faces in providing social services to those who need

them most. This is not because those responsibilities must also be shouldered by government and by corporations and by individual taxpayers. Nobody believes that religion alone could take the place of those institutions and efforts. It is rather that religion's role in civil society is very deeply influenced—facilitated but also constrained—by the cultural norms and broader social structures in which it is embedded. In a word, religion is institutionalized. Therein lies its strength. But therein also lie the routinized ways in which it conducts business, the guiding expectations of its clergy and members, and the invisible hand that governs its relations with other community organizations. The research I present here suggests that houses of worship are not organized to provide dramatically more social services than they presently do. Many congregations are so small that they struggle merely to stay in operation at all. Larger congregations seldom devote more than 5 percent of their annual budgets to the support of formal service programs. What congregations do best is provide support for their members and periodic encouragement for them to care for the needy in their communities. Volunteering has been on the rise and it is often more frequent among people of faith than among others; yet we need to be careful about overestimating the impact of this volunteering. Much of it is devoted to staffing the internal programs of congregations rather than connecting them to the wider community. Faith-based service agencies have emerged as the front line of organized religion's involvement in service delivery. Some of these agencies are large, well funded, and quite effective. Many are small and incapable of doing all they would like to do. As we shall see, most do not emphasize faith very much and, with a few exceptions, it is unclear whether emphasizing faith more would be beneficial. Lower-income families do seek help from these agencies and from their congregations. They would have a harder time finding assistance if these organizations did not exist. They especially appreciate their congregations, even though the help they receive there is modest. They do not believe faith-based service agencies are more effective or trustworthy than secular agencies. When religious organizations help people, trust is often one of the most positive results. Trust, however, is much more complex than we generally realize. Spreading messages about love and compassion, too, is one of the important roles of religion. Yet there are cultural understandings of love that bear little resemblance to the ideals of unconditional love found in religious texts, and we are much better as a society at rewarding

people for being givers than we are at maintaining the dignity of those who have to depend on the help of others.

Evaluating the contribution of American religion to the well-being of our society is thus a matter of bringing hard facts to bear on a number of difficult questions. It is not enough to say that religion *could* do more if only government larders were opened and fewer restrictions were placed on it. Asking what religious organizations actually do to assist needy families forces us to view religion in a new way. We have to move beyond the commonly reported statistics about how many people attend religious services or how many believe in God. We also have to look further than if we simply wanted to know if a particular prison program works well or if fewer people are on welfare this year than last. It is one thing to tell heart-warming anecdotes about the good programs a particular church or ministry is operating, quite another to gauge systematically what is happening in the larger community or in the nation as a whole. Even information of that kind, though, needs to be considered differently if we are to understand how civil society is being affected by churches and by faith-based service programs. Civil society is about social relationships. Its strength lies in the quality of those relationships: whether they are enduring and supportive, whether they bring diverse groups together, whether they provide assistance when assistance is needed, and whether they make it possible for people to mobilize to achieve their values. These are the larger questions that must be considered. They are far more difficult and, indeed, longer lasting than policy debates about whether particular faith-based initiatives should or should not be expanded. They are questions about the organization of American religion, about how congregations function, and about the activities of specialized agencies and the services they provide.

Answering these questions requires more than summarizing the results of a single research study, as has been customary in scholarly publishing. No single study can address all of these questions. We are fortunate to have several good studies that address some of the relevant questions. These include large national studies that offer generalizations about houses of worship and about the American public. Yet, when these studies are compared, they sometimes yield widely discrepant results. As a first step, therefore, we must pay closer attention to the methods employed in these studies, looking carefully at what was done and whether the results are credible. In ad-

dition, we need to make better use of relevant information in surveys and other data sets that have not yet been analyzed. Those sources of information need to be brought to bear on the debate about faith-based service provision.

Bringing Evidence to Bear

This volume presents new and newly analyzed information from a number of recent studies and integrates this information with results that have been published by other researchers. I have conducted three national surveys in recent years that provide a wealth of information about religion and social services. I have also directed a community study over the past decade that has gathered information from the full service delivery system in that community: agency directors, volunteers, clergy, community leaders, and recipients. This information provides insights from hundreds of in-depth qualitative interviews in which people talk in their own words about their experiences and perceptions as clients of service agencies or as volunteers or staff. In addition, I present new information drawn from several other major national surveys.

In considering this information, I am interested in answering questions not only about faith-based services, but also about the larger role of religion in American society. Few observers would deny that religion has a vital place in the United States. We know, for instance, that belief in God, churchgoing, church membership, and the proportion of people who claim religion is important in their lives are all quite high in the United States compared to levels in many other societies, especially in Western Europe.¹ Yet there are mixed views of whether the religious commitment of many Americans makes much difference in their lives and to the wider society. The mixed views about the results of personal faith are relevant to discussions about the role of religion in public life as well. It may be that religion contributes importantly to our society by serving the needy in many ways, both formal and informal. It may also be that religion's role, while valuable, is not as significant as may have been assumed.

The criteria by which researchers usually seek to evaluate American religion range from such simple measures as attendance at religious services to more complex indicators of variation in belief, devotional practice, institutional involvement, leadership, and service.² The inclusion of service

among these criteria is based on the view that religious teachings generally attach some significance to helping the needy and caring for the disadvantaged. To study congregations' and individuals' service activities is thus a way to determine the extent to which these teachings are being put into practice.

Information about congregations' and individuals' service activities is a useful place to begin in trying to understand the role of faith-based social services in civil society. But it is only a start. Too often that information shows that, yes, congregations and individuals do things voluntarily and of a benevolent nature, but reveals little else. Questions remain about which congregations and individuals do more, why they do, and what exactly they do. The question about what they do is especially important. Much of the volunteering and charitable giving that congregations generate may be directed toward maintaining the congregation itself—paying the clergy and keeping the facilities in good repair. If that is the case, and especially if the congregation is composed of comfortable middle-class families who have few needs they cannot meet themselves, then it is difficult to say that congregations are truly benefitting all segments of civil society, including the most disadvantaged. Alternatively, it may be that congregations' principal form of service is to their members, including people with serious needs, and that this service is far more important than the few specialized programs congregations may help to sponsor. If that were the case, it would cast the present discussion of faith-based service programs in a different light. It would, for instance, suggest that government policies should focus on facilitating the work of congregations, but it would raise difficult questions about how best to do this without violating constitutional guarantees about the separation of church and state. Yet another possibility is that specialized faith-based service agencies are really the major vehicles through which religion contributes to civil society, with congregations playing a supportive role to these agencies behind the scenes. If that were so, government policy might be directed toward these programs, and it might raise fewer questions about separation of church and state, especially if these specialized agencies refrain from attempting to make religious converts. These are alternative possibilities that policy makers seldom take into account.

I shall argue that faith-based social services are a complex array of activities that sometimes work quite well, that often differ little from the activ-

ities of nonsectarian organizations, that on the whole contribute positively to the functioning of civil society, and yet that also play a relatively small role in relation to government and other service providers. Faith-based agencies must therefore be understood in terms of their linkages with the larger social networks of which civil society is composed. This is not an argument that can be easily encapsulated in a single phrase or expressed through a vivid anecdote. Faith-based services are like government or families in this respect. We might be titillated by slogans about government being too big or families being in decline, but if we are thoughtful observers of these institutions, we know that the realities are more complex. In the case of religion, congregations *are* a source of formal service programs, but the proportion of congregations that are capable of sponsoring such programs is certainly less than 100 percent and many of these programs exist only because of coalitions among congregations and connections with nonsectarian community agencies. Formal service programs, moreover, are ultimately not what congregations are about. As we shall see, the functioning of congregations is better described as providing a caring community, and congregations work best when people form long-lasting personal friendships and participate in small groups. These informal relationships play an important role in supporting people and in helping them through difficult times. It is hard to assign a dollar value to these ways of helping. At the same time, the relationships in congregations are often homogeneous and may not reach across social status lines very effectively. Intentional volunteering programs sponsored by churches do some of that. Volunteering has been the focus of so much idealistic public rhetoric, though, that we need to take a close look at it to see if people actually volunteer for those most in need of it and, if so, why people volunteer and what kinds of networks are produced by their volunteering. The specialized faith-based service agencies that have attracted so much interest in recent years need to be considered quite distinctly from congregations but also in relation to them. Whether they are large and national in scope, such as Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army, or small and more limited in scope, such as a local food pantry or homeless shelter, these specialized faith-based service agencies have functions different from those of churches, they are usually organized quite differently than churches are, and they are often separately incorporated. The line separating them from nonsectarian

service organizations—in which faith is not officially present but may be there informally—is often thin. Yet some of these faith-based organizations are markedly different from the others, and we need to be careful in sorting them out and to exercise caution in generalizing from them.

The missing voices in most discussions of service organizations are the recipients and potential recipients of these organizations. It is easier to study volunteers or clergy or agency directors than it is to track down people in lower-income families and find out what they think, need, and want. There is of course a body of literature about welfare recipients, made possible by government-mandated data collection from welfare agencies.³ But these studies seldom tell us much about needy families who are not on welfare and they rarely include any information about religion. Recipients are not always in the best position to say whether faith-based service agencies perform effectively, or even if their own long-term needs have been met. They can, however, tell whether they were satisfied with the help they got and whether they felt the caregivers they dealt with were trustworthy. From examining the characteristics of recipients and potential recipients, we can also draw informed conclusions about who seeks assistance from particular kinds of service agencies (faith-based or otherwise), and why they do. In addition, recipients provide an excellent reality check on the information supplied by agency directors and volunteers. Directors may think they do a lot to cultivate trust in clients; clients may see it differently. Similarly, volunteers may think themselves motivated by laudable altruistic values, and yet recipients may feel that strings are attached to the assistance they receive.

Questions about trust, altruism, and perceptions of motives point to the fact that civil society is not composed only of networks and social services. Civil society is importantly composed of culture. Congregations convey messages about caring and the reasons to be concerned for the needy. Volunteers and specialized service agencies convey these messages as well. Through the interaction among agency directors and between caregivers and recipients, relationships of trust are established—at least ideally. Trust and the ability to trust help smooth the way for interaction of other kinds, such as efforts to improve the community or to pass caregiving received along to others in need. And trust is not, as some economists would have us believe, simply a matter of calculating probabilities. Trust is cultural, a

cultural construction of scripts and narratives that tell us whom we can trust, on what basis we can trust them, and how to make sense of it when our expectations are not met. Besides trust, the culture of civil society is also composed of messages about caregiving itself, about the giving and receiving of gifts, about compassion, and about love. These messages and the values on which they are based are often assumed in discussions of faith-based services but are seldom examined. We will want to pay special attention to these cultural dimensions, to the kinds of scripts and narratives that sociologists have come increasingly to emphasize in work known as cultural sociology.⁴ These cultural dimensions, like the service activities themselves, are complex. They involve storytelling of a special kind, storytelling that weaves self-interested motives together with altruism, and narratives that understand care received both as a free gift and as one surrounded with expectations and responsibilities.

Beyond the Modernization Story

To understand why so many of the questions I have just described remain unanswered requires stepping back from the current discussions about faith-based social services and situating these discussions in the context of historic and more recent relationships between religion and social service. These relationships have a long history, too long to recount in any detail here, but one that must be understood in general contour if we are to see the importance of the present debate. This is a history about which the telling has been as interesting as the events themselves.

In nearly all accounts of how social services developed in the United States, there is at least brief acknowledgment of an early history or prehistory in which religion figured prominently. Poor relief in colonial America was heavily influenced by patterns of social service provision in Western Europe. In England and other Protestant countries these patterns owed much to the distinctive relations between church and state that developed during the Reformation. Relief was administered through tax-supported alms houses and hospitals, local programs, and voluntary benevolences collected by the churches. Relationships of patronage and clientage bound people in local communities together in a kind of moral economy that protected the weak from periodic famines and losses from illness and death

and ensured that the strong would have a more reliable workforce. Gradually the modern state came to play a more important role in monitoring social needs and centrally administering public welfare.⁵

The development of social service provision is a story that can be told in a way that fits comfortably with the so-called modernization framework that became popular among social scientists during the middle half of the twentieth century. In this framework the institutions that perform basic societal functions, such as the economy, family, and government, become more specialized, autonomous, and clearly differentiated from one another as societies become more modern and complex. The process is much like the development of more specialized tissues and organs in biological evolution. Thus, religion gradually retreats into its own domain, serving purely spiritual aims, while other institutions become more secularized. In addition, the modernization story suggests that societies become more rational or at least are governed more clearly in their major decision-making processes by rational considerations as they become more modern. To be a modern society, therefore, is to devote more effort to planning and to the use of scientific information in planning, and to be more concerned about questions of effectiveness and efficiency in the pursuit of major societal goals.⁶

Like other stories, the plotline of modernization stories generally begins with an opening scene, called the traditional period, moves on to an intermediate scene, called the transitional phase, and culminates in a final scene, called the modern period. The modernization story about social service provision suggests that in the traditional period social services were largely performed by religious functionaries, especially by local priests, and that charity was usually part of a patronage system that maintained the feudal order, preventing it from caving in under its own weight. In the traditional period social services may have been relatively effective because societies were simple and the needs were presumably not as great as later on, but social services were also not very well differentiated from religion or family and as a result these services mostly helped people who were members of well-established communities and were ill suited to the changes that came when people started moving around. In the transitional phase, the modernization story suggests that there was a kind of seesaw motion between the forces of traditionalism, which usually included religion, and the forces of modernization, which included the emerging state and the enlightened

bureaucrats associated with the state. Through a process that often looked in retrospect to have consisted of taking two steps forward and one step backward, societies gradually developed a more effective system of delivering social services. In the meantime there was much anguish and inefficiency. Religious leaders sometimes championed more effective service programs, but just as likely wanted to restrict these programs and maintain control of them. Or religious leaders developed new ideas about individual responsibility and thus turned a cold shoulder to the needy. Sometimes there was an abundance of private charity, with hundreds of organizations attempting to ameliorate social problems, but the very proliferation of these programs led modernization theorists to believe that they were not as rationally organized as they should have been. Eventually the modern state, with its more rational ways, stepped in, took charge of welfare programs, and solved many of the problems that had existed during the transitional phase. Modern welfare programs had the advantage of dealing with the total population's needs, rather than being restricted to members of particular religious groups. These modern programs were based on a modern conception of rights, which reflected new understandings of the worth and dignity of the individual person, and they were administered scientifically in ways that were fair, efficient, and effective.

Of course the modernization story never quite adequately depicted the facts. It missed the high degree of rationality that was present in many of the medieval social programs and the complex relationships that existed then among states and religious leaders and wealthy individual patrons. It underestimated the continuing significance of religious organizations in providing social services during the centuries of transition prior to the modern period and the innovativeness and effectiveness of new benevolence associations and mutual aid societies. As social scientists looked more carefully at the history of the welfare state, they found that the very organizational capacity that permitted governments to develop more expansive service functions was predicated on strong private associations within civil society, including religious ones.⁷ They discovered that the religious individualism that had previously been regarded as a barrier to inclusive welfare programs was not a significant barrier after all.⁸ And, most important, the rational and scientific programs of welfare administration became easy prey for critics as decades passed and the cost of social programs increased without as much in tangible results as had been expected.

Once the modernization story came to be seen as a poor caricature of past developments it became easier for critics of the public welfare system to imagine an alternative story. That story was one of tragic decline rather than of optimistic development. The tragedy lay in the modern state itself. As it took over more of the functions of private charity, the state introduced inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Rationality and scientific calculations were cold and impersonal compared to the warmth of private charity, and thus were destined to fail. In this story, religion had actually been providing social services quite well until government stepped in, tried to do what religion had always done better, and pushed religion into the corner. The more government tried to do, the more religiously motivated volunteers who would have otherwise played a role stayed on the sidelines. Moreover, welfare recipients had little incentive to work because they had a right to public assistance and they were in any case not receiving the personalized attention they would have in religious organizations. Professionalized social service providers were not so much offering skilled assistance as protecting their new monopoly over service delivery. Government either needed to pull back and let private charities do more or it needed to at least work more cooperatively with those agencies, since working without them had produced disappointing results.⁹

The Faith-Based Services Debate

During the last two decades of the twentieth century the debate between proponents of the competing versions of social service provision became increasingly animated. The debate was about much more than religion, although religion came to be one of its more contested aspects. The conservative religious movements that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in opposition to abortion and in favor of programs such as prayer in public schools and school vouchers were also concerned about government spending on social service programs. In a national survey conducted in 1984 by the Gallup Organization, for example, Americans who defined themselves religiously as conservatives were almost twice as likely to say they opposed “more government spending on social programs” as people who defined themselves as religious liberals (see table 1.1). The differences were even more pronounced among college graduates, where more than two-thirds of religious conservatives opposed more spending on social

programs, compared with only a quarter of religious liberals.¹⁰ This group of college-educated religious conservatives, moreover, had been growing during the 1970s and thus stood to be an increasingly influential group in national politics. Opposition to government spending had also been a significant plank in the Republican party platform on which Ronald Reagan had become president in 1980. Republicans were decidedly more opposed to government spending on social programs than Democrats, whether they were religious conservatives, moderates, or liberals, while among Democrats, those who were religiously conservative provided another constituency in which there was considerable opposition to spending on social programs.

With religious conservatives increasingly aligned with the Republican party, and with the emphasis on rolling back government that became prominent during the so-called Reagan revolution, discussions about the possible role of religious organizations in providing social services became increasingly partisan. On the right, government willingness to channel public funds to religious organizations came to be seen as a right that the religious community deserved, just as school vouchers or prayers in public schools were.¹¹ On the left, leaders of religious organizations worried that

TABLE 1.1
Opposition to Welfare Spending
(Percentage in each category who oppose more government spending on social programs)

	<i>Religious Conservatives</i>	<i>Religious Moderates</i>	<i>Religious Liberals</i>
All	47	38	25
High school degree or less	40	33	24
Some college	58	46	29
College graduate	68	46	24
Republicans	62	54	43
Democrats	35	23	14
Number	(277)	(714)	(288)

Source: The Gallup Organization, Liberal-Conservative Survey, 1984; machine-readable data file.

conservatives merely wanted to scale back public programs that their own organizations had encouraged government to support ever since the New Deal and especially since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs in the 1960s.¹² As the cost of social programs steadily increased, though, there was widening public support for efforts to initiate reforms aimed at reducing welfare rolls and requiring welfare recipients to seek jobs.¹³ Against some opposition within his own party, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act into law in August 1996. The measure set limits on how long welfare recipients could receive public support and set in motion a number of reforms including the Charitable Choice provision that eased restrictions on religiously oriented service agencies that wished to apply for government funds to support their programs. A strong economy, a declining proportion of people with incomes below the poverty line (as discussed in chapter 6), and an expanding number of jobs during the last half of the 1990s reduced some of the difficulties of requiring welfare recipients to seek jobs. The reforms were sufficiently popular that both of the leading candidates for president during the 2000 campaign endorsed further reforms. Both candidates also promised to encourage greater participation in social service provision by religious and other private service organizations, although George W. Bush was more vocal in his encouragement than Democrat candidate Al Gore.¹⁴

In January 2001, President Bush signed an executive order creating and defining the responsibilities of a new agency at the White House for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. In an accompanying document titled "Rallying the Armies of Compassion," Bush observed that "federal policy should reject the failed formula of towering, distant bureaucracies that too often prize process over performance." In place of such bureaucracies, he argued, should be a partnership between government and private agencies staffed by "quiet heroes [who] lift people's lives in ways that are beyond government's know-how." These private charitable groups, including such "faith-based" organizations as those run by Methodists, Muslims, and Mormons, were in Bush's view capable of healing the nation's ills "one heart and one act of kindness at a time." The president insisted that the new thrust in government funding be results oriented. "We must be outcome-based, insisting on success and steering resources to the effective and to the inspired." He also acknowledged that the program should be consistent

with such principles as "pluralism, nondiscrimination, evenhandedness and neutrality."¹⁵

The questions raised by the January 2001 executive order and by subsequent efforts to craft legislative bills to expand or clarify the relationship between government and faith-based service organizations fell largely into two broad categories. One set of questions focused on the complexities of implementing faith-based programs when government funding and regulations are involved. These questions ranged from considerations about the rights and fair treatment of clients to considerations about separation of church and state and accountability to the wider public.¹⁶ These "fairness and rights" considerations are evident in Bush's language about pluralism and evenhandedness. They focus especially on questions about recipients' access to agencies capable of meeting their needs without respect to religious preferences, nondiscrimination in supplying services to all qualified applicants, religious tests in hiring agency staff, and the free exercise of religion. A second set of questions concerned the agenda-setting function of policy makers, clergy, and other public leaders. These questions included considerations such as how much of social welfare provision can be expected to be accomplished through faith-based organizations, whether there are reasons to believe these organizations are more effective than government-sponsored or nonsectarian organizations in delivering social services, and whether there are sufficient secondary benefits from involving faith-based organizations in service provision to warrant public leaders calling greater attention to the activities of these organizations. We might refer to these as questions about "scope and effectiveness."¹⁷ The "fairness and rights" questions and the "scope and effectiveness" questions are interconnected, of course; for instance, if faith-based service provision is sizable and effective, then it may be more important to work out the technicalities of rendering it more accountable to the public than if it is small and inconsequential. The two sets of questions nevertheless call for different kinds of expertise. The "fairness and rights" questions have rightly been addressed by scholars with legislative and legal expertise, while the "scope and effectiveness" questions fall more squarely into the domain of social scientists. It is for this reason that social scientists are now beginning to examine questions about what churches and more specialized faith-based organizations are doing and how well they are doing it.

While the policy debates about faith-based services have focused public and scholarly attention on the role of religion, these discussions have also narrowed the questions toward which most of this attention has been directed. When elected officials champion faith-based services, it has been difficult for critics not to be skeptical about the possibility that some hidden agenda is behind their support. Are they, for instance, in favor of faith-based services because they want to cut back on government programs? Are they currying favor with religious conservatives or with some other religious group that stands to gain from government funding? Are their own religious convictions clouding their perceptions of complex social realities? Apart from these questions, it has also been necessary to focus on such legislative and judicial matters as how to protect the rights of clients who may not wish to seek help from faith-based organizations, whether to permit faith-based organizations to discriminate on religious grounds in hiring staff, and how to prevent monies intended for social services to be used in ways that further the sectarian mission of religious organizations. All of those are important considerations, and yet they risk losing sight of the distinctive features of religion and its larger place in American society.

The value of renewed interest over the past decade in civil society is that it reorients thinking away from the modernization story and criticisms of that story. Where modernization pointed to institutional differentiation, civil society emphasizes the interaction among institutions. Voluntary associations draw people from their families and workplaces into organizations that may look very similar to businesses even though they are not oriented toward profits, and their activities may link local concerns with national interests and generate a political response even though they are not part of the government. Civil society is quite often an arena in which rational discussion takes place about matters of common concern such as schools, transportation, and the environment; at the same time, civil society is composed of neighborhoods, ethnic associations, and religious congregations that seek to preserve traditions in symbolic and expressive ways that transcend rational discussion. The gravest concern about civil society is that it is declining, or, more accurately, that public participation in the activities on which civil society depends is declining. Thus, the role of religion in civil society may be considered afresh by scholars or by public leaders who once wrote it off as a remnant of the past that would be less and less relevant in the present world. The possible contribution of religion to the social net-

works, values, and trust on which civil society depends can be entertained without taking sides as to whether it has a special role to play.

As a long-time student of American religion, I am heartened by the possibilities these new perspectives on civil society and the place of religion in civil society have created. Religion has too often been viewed by its defenders as an unrivaled source of personal meaning and purpose for its adherents and too often regarded by its critics as an impossibly naïve yearning for a lost belief system that can never again be fully believable. Religion is of course about meaning and belief. But it is not only about that. Religion is fundamentally social, about the relationships among people and within communities and between individuals and organizations, and it is therefore contextual. Its meanings are contextual, given life and given reality through the concrete settings in which it is expressed. Its implications are always conditioned by the contexts in which it occurs. This is why it is as important to understand the limitations of religion and the ways in which its ideals go awry or are not fully realized as it is to examine its strengths. We know full well that religion is capable of tremendous evil as well as of good. We know too that public rhetoric about the good and the evil of religion is generally belied by the complexities of real religion in real places.

Religion as an Embedded Practice

The critique of older perspectives that emphasized modernization leads us to recognize more clearly the need to understand religion—indeed all institutions—in a new way. Religion is too often conceived of, even by social scientists who study it, as a kind of autonomous sphere that, to be sure, interacts with other institutions (such as family or politics) but that can largely be understood on its own terms; that is, as a collection of congregations, denominational structures, clergy, and members with particular loyalties and beliefs. This view has been encouraged by academic specialization that leads people to focus on one sphere, because there is so much to be understood about that sphere, and sometimes by foundations that sponsor research concerned with the distinctive problems and dynamics of churches without paying more attention to the larger contexts in which those organizations function. In the extreme, the view of religion as an autonomous sphere is conducive to an economic approach to religion that treats it as if it were composed of rational actors making choices in terms

of a kind of contract oriented toward maximizing their self-interest. Religion then becomes little more than a set of suppliers who compete with one another to attract and satisfy customers. The implication of this view for policies about faith-based organizations is that government can probably find ways to evaluate competing programs and reward those that compete best. In recent years, scholars have begun to recognize the inadequacy of looking at religion in this way. The very notion of faith-based organizations working in partnership with government to supply social services reveals that religion is hardly as autonomous as the supply-demand theorists would have us believe. More broadly, we are coming to greater awareness that religion has not retreated from the public sphere as much as modernization theorists predicted it would and has instead become “deprivatized,” in José Casanova’s memorable phrasing, to the point that its interactions with governments are increasingly dynamic and influential.¹⁸ Similarly, we are learning that personal religious practices cannot be understood by only studying churches or by asking people in surveys about church attendance; these personal practices manifest themselves in the workplace, at volunteer centers, and in homes. Yet the older view of religion as a largely autonomous sphere is the one that has prevailed among policy makers and has thus been the underlying perspective in recent policy debates about faith-based social services. In that view, religion is something that can be *acted upon* by government. It exists as a potential of well-meaning service-oriented believers who would simply do more if government let them. Funneling government funding to their service programs would help them do more. So would passing legislation removing barriers on religiously oriented programs that may have been present because of concerns about separation of church and state. There is some truth in the argument that funding and legislation of these kinds would affect religion—were there not, it would be of little value to entertain such policies in the first place. What is missed in these discussions is that religion is embedded in the wider society. Just as market transactions and other economic activities are embedded in social networks and communities, so religion is structured by and exists in interaction with its social environment.¹⁹ Religion is embedded in social norms, in cultural values and understandings, and in arrangements of resources and power that fundamentally shape it and cause it to be the way it is. Tinkering with faith-based programs in ways that do not

take account of these larger arrangements is done at the risk of both unforeseen and negative outcomes.

The embedding of religion occurs in the first instance through the historic competition among religious bodies that has produced the distinctive configuration of congregations and faith communities that now characterize American religion. It is no accident that many congregations are too small to be significantly engaged in social service provision. Forecasters predict that small congregations will die and increasingly be replaced by larger ones, including so-called megachurches that attract thousands of members. For the time being, though, small congregations exist in large numbers because many were founded by people who lived in small towns and farming communities, because these congregations have been remarkably robust and even resistant to change in these communities, and because many other small congregations have been founded in cities and suburbs to meet the needs of distinctive ethnic groups and new immigrant populations.²⁰ Although there are competitive advantages for congregations that are larger (such as being able to attract new members by offering a larger variety of programs), small congregations also adapt well to the American landscape. Religious voluntarism, which is in turn a function of the separation of church and state, is one of the important reasons for these congregations. Clergy and lay leaders who become dissatisfied with existing congregations can start new ones. Entrepreneurialism is often rewarded. Existing congregations are often complicit as well in helping to cover the costs of new mission churches deemed necessary because of new communities and new population groups. It is thus not the case that small congregations can simply be understood as losers in some competitive economic game. They exist and continue to be an important part of American religion because of the resources and opportunities available to them. At the same time, competition among congregations encourages what has been termed organizational isomorphism to occur, resulting in greater similarity in programs despite different histories or theological orientations.²¹ Church offices, support staff, Sunday school programs, small group ministries, and even architectural styles are all instances of organizational isomorphism. Social service programs are no exception. Congregations that can afford them generally include them, even though these programs may be small or understaffed.

The embedding of congregations and of congregation-based service programs also involves the growing number of secular nonprofit service organizations that are present in most communities. The reality, contrary to much of the public rhetoric about faith-based organizations, is not one of services being provided either by government welfare offices or by churches.²² Secular service organizations and specialized faith-based service agencies also exist in abundance. They do for many reasons, including government funding and favorable legislation, but also including long-term growth in service professions during the twentieth century and the need for professionalized services and bureaucratic structures to administer the greatly expanding range of social services that were needed and provided.²³ The growth of nonprofit organizations developed in a context of market competition much like that of for-profit organizations.²⁴ Although not oriented toward earning profits for owners and shareholders, nonprofit organizations nevertheless competed to attract clients, to secure funding, and to demonstrate their effectiveness to board members, clients, and potential funders. Markets are always messy. The nonprofit sector was thus characterized by redundancy and by fluidity as new organizations emerged and older ones died. The so-called faith-based organizations that developed in this context grew from multiple sources and took many forms.²⁵ The term *faith-based* itself came into being through at least implicit recognition of this multiplicity. As specialized service organizations, they needed to be distinguished from congregations, and yet calling them faith-based provided enough vagueness that congregations could be subsumed if it were convenient to do so. To say that they were faith-based also left open the extent to which they might indeed be influenced by faith: possibilities ranged (as we will discuss in chapter 5) from merely having been initiated by people of faith to being completely under the control of clergy or religiously oriented boards. It is more problematic to understand why *faith* became the preferred term rather than *religion*, but one may reasonably speculate that the predominance of Christian and even evangelical churches and church leaders had something to do with this choice—*faith* being perhaps a friendlier term than the more academic and distanced term *religion*. The imprint of Christianity on the preference for *faith* is also evident in the fact that faith is certainly more central to the Christian tradition than it is to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. Thus, the need for inclusive language amidst an increasingly diverse array of reli-

gious communities was only partially met. What is more important than the language itself, though, is the fact that faith-based service organizations emerged, not only in competition with secular service agencies, but also in complex interaction with them. Service organizations are linked to one another through cooperative funding and staffing arrangements. Volunteers are important conduits of skills and information that connect various service organizations. Clients typically seek assistance from several organizations, rather than meeting their needs only at one. Congregations are linked to one another and to secular organizations through cooperative service programs. And professional associations, interest groups, and foundations also supply linkages. All of this makes it impossible to understand the role of religion in service provision, let alone in civil society more broadly, without paying attention to these social connections.

The embedding of American religion in its service functions occurs further through the shared cultural understandings that make up civil society in the United States. These understandings are fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, there is a long history of altruism in American culture, if it can be called that, or at least of voluntarism and service. Neighborliness at the local level and the many fraternal associations and civic clubs that were founded in the nineteenth century were manifestations of this spirit and, as we shall see, recent surveys indicate that caring for the needy and contributing time to help with community service projects is still a value to which most Americans subscribe. On the other hand, Americans are also intensely individualistic, wanting to be self-sufficient, skeptical of people who are not self-sufficient, and driven by such self-interested motives as greed, materialism, and excessive consumerism. Religious programs are situated amidst these contradictory impulses. They often encourage people to think more compassionately about the poor, but they also channel this thinking in individualistic ways that may encourage charity more than public advocacy on behalf of the poor.²⁶ There are other contradictory impulses as well. Faith sometimes encourages people to evangelize those they are trying to help, but norms of civic tolerance and respect discourage people from being too explicit about those efforts. Faith commitments undergird the caring communities present among the members of most congregations; these same commitments, though, may tell people to serve the needy outside their congregations rather than caring only for people within their own group. In relationships with clients, service

providers and volunteers may be motivated by personal religious convictions, but their behavior may be governed more by professional norms that discourage them from disclosing these convictions. Just how much or how little faith is actually present in faith-based service organizations is thus an empirical question. It may be that government restrictions have inhibited its full expression, but it is just as likely that cultural norms are the reason.

The sum of these considerations is that religion is embedded especially within what has been called civil society. Civil society is the sphere of social relations and institutions that exists between the sphere of government and the sphere of for-profit market-oriented organizations.²⁷ It is the realm of free association and of voluntary associations that has proven so vital to U.S. democracy during the course of its history. We normally think of civil society as being concerned with the public expression of collective values, more so than with the private time people spend alone or with their families. However, the distinction between public and private is difficult to sustain once we recognize how much of our personal lives—whether concerned with childrearing, sexual practices, birth control, or merely television watching—is also a matter of public debate and even of public policy. Religion, too, combines the private, in the form of intensely personal religious convictions, and the public, in the form of worship, through participation in service activities, and in public discussion about the appropriate role of religion in our communities. It is more helpful to think of civil society in terms of the complex social norms and networks that tie individuals and organizations together. These are the kinds of cultural understandings and linkages I have just described. They promote cooperation or reduce the likelihood of overt conflict, they form the basis for mobilizing political participation or of initiating community programs that can be done without the involvement of government, and in the best of circumstances they tie people together in bonds of mutual obligation.

A Civil Society?

Differences in social status—or, less euphemistically, inequalities among social classes—are the hidden reality in American religion, and indeed in American society more generally.²⁸ They are the hidden reality that seldom receives the attention they deserve. Alexis de Tocqueville's influential treat-

ment of civil society in the United States during the early nineteenth century focused more on the problems of *equality* than on those associated with inequality. Everywhere he traveled, Tocqueville was impressed that Americans were all alike, sharing roughly the same incomes and occupational opportunities and, perhaps even more surprisingly, regarding themselves as one another's equals. The problem was thus, in his view, to prevent the undifferentiated masses from devolving into a kind of tasteless, formless amalgam over which the media would have too much influence and upon which demagogues could prey. There was plenty of inequality in the communities Tocqueville visited. But in comparing the United States with the entrenched aristocratically ruled societies he knew in Europe, he could not help being impressed by equality more than by inequality.²⁹

This emphasis on equality has continued to be an implicit assumption in most discussions of civil society. We find, for instance, that treatments of civic engagement are more concerned with the proportion of all Americans who vote, join community organizations, or serve as volunteers than with whether or not civic engagement is as abundant or as helpful to people in lower-income communities as to those in middle-class neighborhoods.³⁰ Volunteering, one almost assumes from these treatments, is just as beneficial if it helps middle-class children in well-staffed suburban schools as if it involves staffing a shelter for the homeless or doing pro bono work for the poor.

Discussions of faith-based service organizations are especially valuable, therefore, because they require us to consider activities that cut across class lines and that are deliberately concerned with assisting the disadvantaged and marginalized. Some of these discussions, however, require us to look even more carefully at what is meant by service or assistance. For example, the caring that takes place in congregations may help the occasional family within the congregation who happens to fall on hard times, but may not include a systematic effort to reach from the middle-class congregation in one part of town to the lower-income neighborhood in another part of town. Similarly, the public face of faith-based social services is sometimes that of programs concerned with prison inmates, who are supposedly there as a result of their own actions and are a burden to society unless some effective means of rehabilitation are found, or with substance abusers, who may be viewed in the same way. Valuable as it is to know what benefits

these special populations, the larger questions about civil society cannot be fully addressed without paying attention to the broader needs of the poor and of other disadvantaged groups.

Bringing questions about religion together with questions about service provision also means extending our view of civil society beyond that of how much or how little lower-income families are represented at the polls and whether or not they can mobilize more effectively to make claims on public policy. The disenfranchisement of the poor and of minority groups is certainly a serious social problem. The trouble with focusing only on enfranchisement and interest-formation is that the end in view is never anything but government policy. Little wonder, then, that the picture of how civil society actually works is always somewhat out of focus. People not only work in concert with government, but also pursue activities separate from it. Those who need assistance would often be better served if laws and tax dollars took greater account of their needs. And yet the job training, emergency food and shelter, transportation, and child care is often provided partly through private sources. This is even more the case for the emotional and social support people receive through their congregations.

Considering the changing and much contested role of religion in providing social services in our society is thus an opportunity to take a fresh look at American religion itself. Whether or not the debate that has engaged so many researchers and policy makers over the past decade continues, we can be sure that American religion itself will remain an important part of civil society. It will remain important but sufficiently complex that careful attention to its contours and contributions will be required.