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Religion, Faith-Based Community Organizing, and the Struggle for Justice
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On May 2, 2000, three thousand people converged on the State Capitol in Sacramento, California.² But this was not the usual frenzy of lobbyists serving the interests of the well-off, using the tools of well-oiled political action committees. Rather, these were working poor, working class, and lower-middle income people lately referred to as “working families” and they went to Sacramento because they were tired of living on the verge of financial ruin or physical debility. Attendees were demanding adequate health coverage for people left out by current health care arrangements and they were angry about that, at a time when remarkable wealth was being accumulated all around them and California was running a \$10 billion budget surplus.

The occasion was an “action” entitled “Healthcare for All Californians: Reweaving the Fabric of American Communities,” sponsored by the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO). The day’s event drew on recent academic research showing 1.5 million California children formally eligible for subsidized health coverage but still uninsured due to onerous inscription procedures, and a total of 7.3 million Californians uninsured, most relying on community clinics or emergency rooms for their medical care. The same research showed 82% of the uninsured to be members of working families, with nearly half headed by a family member working full-time for all of 1999.³

They packed the hall with a crowd approximately 40% Latino, 40% white, and 20% African American and Hmong. And they were loud: they believed they had to be to turn around a state government that had so far rejected any solution that might be labeled an “entitlement” to medical care. More than a few leading California politicians and political aides reportedly did double-takes as they entered the largest and most multiracial political gathering in Sacramento in years.

The event began with a reading from the book of Amos, the Hebrew prophet who denounced an earlier time when the wealthy violated Yahweh’s covenant by turning their backs on the poor:

I hate, I despise your feasts
I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals.
When you offer me holocausts and grain offerings
I will not accept them...
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an overflowing stream.⁴
Amos 5:21-24

The event continued with a prayer by a San Francisco pastor, Bill Knezovich:

Holy God, be here with us. At the beginning of our work, send upon us the spirit of Amos, so that we may go forward knowing that change will only be done by ourselves, advocating for our families and for all those not here with us. Hold before us all those old people forced to choose between food and medicine; all those couples ruined by medical diseases; all our own children whose health is neglected because we cannot afford to pay for medicine. Hold them before us so that we might fight with a righteous anger, as Amos did.

There was much more: testimony by a woman traumatized by her husband’s suicide: he preferred to kill himself rather than ruin his family financially through a long illness. There were reports in English, Spanish, and Hmong from families suffering the gnawing anxiety of living

without medical coverage. There were demands that part of California's surplus be used to alleviate the health care crisis, a specific proposal to better fund community health clinics, and talk of a legislative bill to expand the "Healthy Families" medical insurance program in California.

A series of state political figures were then asked to commit themselves to work with PICO on this agenda. Among others, the President Pro-Tempore of the California Senate, John Burton, stepped to the microphone saying, "First of all, I'm overwhelmed at this magnificent turnout." He then committed himself to working with PICO to expand health coverage in California for the working poor.

More followed, but the flavor of the evening is perhaps best captured by two quotations. The first was a phrase reiterated by a number of PICO leaders from around the state: "Healthcare now, for all God's people! Alleluia! Amen." The other was invoked repeatedly by PICO leader Cesar Portillo, an immigrant from Mexico. Responding to the political mantra of "no new entitlements" common in American politics today, at various points in the evening Portillo called out "Se puede?" (Spanish for "Can it be done?"), to which the crowd thundered back, "Sí, se puede!"

Ultimately, through many ups and downs, political wins and political crises, this event reshaped California public policy on healthcare (see Wood forthcoming for a full analysis). Within two months, the state approved \$50 million dollars in new funding for the primary care clinics serving poor Californians. More substantial progress came six months later, after sustained pressure from PICO's religiously-based leaders from working-class communities around the state: The state expanded access to the "Healthy Families" program, which previously only covered health care for children, to include some 300,000 working parents earning up to double the federal poverty level (about \$32,000/year for a family of four). Healthy Families inscription procedures were also eased in an effort to draw in more California children eligible but uninsured.

Overview:

These developments in California are crucial for the health and peace of mind of hundreds of thousands of working families, but are important also as one indicator of a much broader phenomenon: Religion has re-emerged in both popular understanding and scholarly analysis as a crucial influence on political dynamics in societies around the world. Much of this attention has focused on either putatively irrational religious influence (e.g. terrorism associated with some strains of non-orthodox Islamic fundamentalism; see Taheri 1987; O'Ballance 1997); religiously-based political activity regarding personal moral behavior (e.g. the "Christian Right" in the United States; see Wald 1987; Reed 1996); or the impact of religious cleavages on voting patterns (Manza and Brooks 1999).

This chapter draws attention to a different facet of religiously-based efforts to shape political dynamics: Religiously-based advocacy to promote greater economic justice for low-income sectors of society. Such efforts are certainly not new: the Exodus story of the ancient Hebrews' flight from slavery in Egypt has provided the inspiration and cultural pattern for struggles for justice for centuries (Walzer 1965); the early popular struggle against enclosure in England drew vigorously from biblical understandings of justice (Hill 1972); the 19th century American labor movement and struggle against slavery drew crucial support from religion (Voss 1993); and, in the 1950s and 1960s, religious institutions provided the key organizational and recruitment vehicles for the black civil rights movement in the United States (Morris 1984). But three factors justify renewed attention to the religiously-based struggle for economic justice: First, we now have greater comparative perspective regarding such efforts due to their recent salience in societies around the world; this makes religiously-based movements for justice appear less a case of "American exceptionalism" and more as a common social phenomenon. Second, emerging scholarly work has developed new insight into the internal dynamics of these

efforts, how and why they succeed or fail, and why they may be important in shaping democratic life. Third, new systematic data provides the most complete view yet of one influential version of these efforts, the “faith-based organizing model” that has gained prominence in the United States and Great Britain over the last two decades, exemplified in the PICO event described above. After first describing the diverse array of religiously-rooted struggles for economic justice around the world, this chapter outlines the contours of faith-based organizing in the U.S. (from where the only systematic data are available), then discusses recent insight into the importance of faith-based organizing for American democracy. It concludes with a brief discussion of the role of religion in struggles for justice more generally.

Faith-Based Struggles for Justice Around the World

In Britain, faith-based organizing has taken root in working-class areas of London and other major cities (Farnell 1994; Warren 2000). British faith-based organizing work draws partly on indigenous sources for theological, scriptural, and political inspiration (see, for example, MacLeod (1993), written by an Anglican pastor; and Sacks (1997), written by a British chief rabbi), and partly on sources borrowed from American faith-based organizing.

In Latin America, community organizing based on religious faith continues to occur in the *comunidades eclesiales de base* movement (usually translated “base Christian communities”). This movement developed in the 1960s and 1970s out of the re-emphasis on the social dimension of Christianity as Catholic leaders implemented the church reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the context of Latin America’s vast social inequality (Marins, Trevisan et al. 1976; Marins, Trevisan et al. 1989; Hewitt 1991; Smith 1991). Although a continent-wide movement, it took deepest root in Brazil, Central America, Peru, some parts of Mexico, and Chile prior to the 1973 military coup there. These groups formed initially as bible study and social reflection groups, partly as a response by Catholic leaders to the challenge presented by proselytism by evangelical groups. But under the influence of pedagogical models for political consciousness-raising (*conscientização*) developed by the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire (1970), and under the pressure of rising economic inequality and political repression in many countries, the *comunidades* rapidly became centers of radical social critique and democratic action. Following military governments in the 1960s and 1970s, they contributed both to the re-democratization of much of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, and to the rise of guerrilla insurgencies in some countries (Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico). Both the concrete experience of these *comunidades* and their theoretical elaboration in the associated “theology of liberation” (Gutiérrez 1973; Sobrino 1978; Tamez 1982; Sobrino 1984; Tamez 1989; Tamez 1990) have been significant influences upon religious movements around the world, including upon faith-based organizing in the United States.

Likewise, evangelical social activism in Latin America has at times been a source of pressure for social justice. Evangelicals have focused primarily on individual moral reform; such issues such as alcoholism, marital infidelity, and gang involvement have been more typical concerns in evangelical Latin American networks than have human rights, democratization, or union struggles. But that has not always been the case. Evangelical scholars in Latin America (Pixley 1986; Pixley and Azevedo 1988; Pixley and Boff 1989) have written important scriptural, historical, and theological works emphasizing the centrality of prophetic denunciation of social injustice in the biblical tradition. David Stoll (1990) argues convincingly that, even where evangelicals have not focused intentionally on social issues, the unintended political consequences of mass evangelical mobilization may actually foster democratization at least as successfully as the more direct demands for radical reform associated with liberationist Christianity.

In South Africa, the Philippines, and Korea, democratic activists closely linked to Christian churches have elaborated scriptural, theological, and doctrinal positions arguing for deep political reform in those societies as the only appropriate response to the demands of the Christian faith. The best known of these statements was the “Kairos Document” issued by

Protestant and Catholic clergy and lay leaders in South Africa in 1986, arguing that apartheid fundamentally and irrevocably contradicted the central tenets of Christianity, calling the churches to repentance for their collusion in apartheid over the years, and demanding immediate action to end that collusion (Kairos Theologians 1986; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). In the Philippines, the “theology of struggle” elaborates a position similar to that of liberation theology in Latin America, but reflective of the particular political situation and political culture of that country (Fernandez 1994). In Korea, “Minjung theology” stakes out a similar role for Christianity, advancing an argument for democratization on the basis of “the people” as the subject of history – “subject” here meaning the active historical agent pushing society forward (Kim 1981; Park 1985; Suh 1987; Kwon 1990).

In a similar vein, religious leaders and theologians working within the Christian, Islamic, and Hindu traditions in Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka have developed extensive statements on the religious vocation in the struggle for social justice in their societies (Yeow, England et al. 1989; Sugden 1997). And various strands of Buddhism have underlain resistance to American involvement in Vietnam, as well as subsequent peace movements in the United States (Nhat Hanh 1967; Nhat Hanh 1987; Nhat Hanh 1998) and the Tibetan struggle against Chinese occupation (Levenson 1988; Bstan-'dzin-rgya 1990; Bstan-dzin-rgya and Thupten 1996; Farrar-Halls 1998).

Faith-based Community Organizing in the United States:

In the United States, the term “community organizing” typically describes work inspired or influenced by the dean of community organizers in the United States, Saul Alinsky.⁵ Alinsky’s work spanned four decades and deeply shaped subsequent grassroots democratic action throughout urban America. The faith-based organizing work described here, also known as “broad-based,” “church-based,” or “congregation-based” community organizing, incorporates techniques promulgated by Alinsky but transcends his legacy in important ways.

Faith-based organizing roots itself institutionally in urban religious congregations, and culturally in the diverse religious practices and world views of participants – their religious culture. Such efforts occur in organizations linked to multiple religious congregations, but autonomous from any single congregation or denomination, and incorporated separately as tax exempt, non-partisan organizations [typically as 501c(3) organizations under the IRS code].⁶

Faith-based organizing remains rather unknown in academic circles, but today arguably represents the most widespread movement for social justice in America, as documented in a new study (Warren and Wood 2001).⁷ With about 133 local or metropolitan-area federations linking some 3,500 congregations plus some 500 public schools, labor union locals, and other institutions (neighborhood associations, social service agencies, community centers, etc), faith-based organizing can plausibly claim to touch the lives of more than two million members of religious congregations in all the major urban areas and many secondary cities around the U.S.⁸ These federations operate in 33 states and the District of Columbia, with strong concentrations in California, Texas, New York, Illinois, and Florida. Their mean income is \$170,500 per year. Almost 90% of these organizations are affiliated with one of four major faith-based organizing networks.⁹

Although each federation carries a distinctive organizational emphasis that colors its work and reflects the institutional influence of a particular network, all adopt a similar organizing model. Each federation organizes in a particular city or metropolitan area via interfaith teams of leaders from 10 to 60 or more religious congregations – and sometimes public schools, neighborhood associations, or union locals – to do research on a given issue and negotiate with political and economic elites. They gain a place at that negotiating table by mobilizing 1,000 to 6,000 participants in non-partisan political actions at which political or corporate officials are asked to commit to specific policies outlined by the federation, or to work with the federation in developing a policy response to a given issue. In this way, the strongest of these metropolitan federations have re-shaped government policy on housing, economic

development, public schools, policing, working-class wages, recreational program for youth, medical coverage, and other issues. In some places federations throughout a state or region have jointly influenced state policy on high-profile issues. For example, in the 1990s, the Texas IAF Network led the transformation of Texas public education through the Alliance Schools project – arguably, one of the key innovations that strengthened public schooling in Texas, for which then-Governor George W. Bush much later claimed credit (Warren 2001). As depicted above, in 2000 the PICO California Project was the central force in transforming health care policy in the most populous American state, extending government-sponsored medical coverage to hundreds of thousands of low-income parents.¹⁰ Regional or statewide initiatives have also occurred in New England, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, Florida, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. Taken together, such efforts have arguably produced the most widespread demands for social justice arising from within American civil society in recent years, and the most substantial gains for low-income Americans not arising directly from government policy during the Clinton presidency, with its very mixed legacy of increased social spending, strong economic growth, welfare reform, and economic re-structuring.

Also noteworthy is the remarkably cross-racial character of this work. Though the ethnic and racial make-up of these organizations varies considerably across different geographic regions, and though some are rather homogeneous, they are diverse even in their homogeneity: some organizations are almost exclusively African-American, others almost exclusively Latino, and still others almost exclusively European-American. Elsewhere, they are quite multiracial, with some federations strongly biracial and others having memberships evenly split between these same three ethnic groups, with smaller numbers of Filipino, Hmong, Caribbean, and Asian immigrant or Asian American participants. No national data currently exist regarding individual-level participation in faith-based organizing, but the same study (Warren and Wood 2001) assessed the ethnic make-up of the *congregations* who sponsor it: Approximately 33% of the congregations are majority African American, 38% are majority white/European, and 20% are majority Latino (both native and immigrant). The remaining 9% are mostly congregations in which no one ethnic group makes up the majority, plus a small number of ethnic Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and other groups. Table 1 summarizes the race/ethnic and religious make-up of the sponsoring congregations:

**Table 1:
Racial Make-up of Congregations Sponsoring Faith-Based Organizing**

<u>Racial/Ethnic Diversity</u> (majority ethnicity of <i>congregations</i>)
38% white/European American
33% African American
20% Hispanic (includes native-born and immigrant)
9% Other (mostly interracial; less than 2% majority Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American)

**Table 2:
Religious Make-Up of Congregations Sponsoring Faith-Based Organizing**

<u>Religious Diversity</u> (denomination of <i>congregations</i>)
35% Roman Catholic
34% moderate/liberal Protestant
13% Baptist (mostly National, Missionary, and Primitive Baptists, thus mostly African American)
5% historic black Protestant
3% traditionalist Protestant
2% Jewish
2% Church of God in Christ (Pentecostal, mostly African-American)
2% Unitarian-Universalist
3% Other Christian
< 1% Other non-Christian

As Table 2 shows, faith-based organizing also exhibits a fair degree of religious diversity. Nationally, some 35% of the congregations engaged in faith-based community organizing are Roman Catholic, 34% are members of denominations usually labeled liberal or moderate Protestant (mostly United Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and United Church of Christ), 5% are affiliated with the historic black church denominations (African Methodist Episcopal, AME-Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal), 13% are Baptist congregations (mostly National Baptists, Primitive Baptists, Missionary Baptist, and independent Baptists – i.e. mostly black Baptists), 3% are unspecified or non-denominational Christian congregations, 3% are traditionalist Protestants, 2% are Unitarian-Universalist congregations, 2% are black Pentecostal congregations affiliated with the Church of God in Christ, and a little less than 2% are Jewish congregations.

Thus, faith-based organizing is primarily based in Roman Catholic, liberal and moderate Protestant, and African American religious traditions, with some representation from other faiths. Quite noteworthy is the scarcity of traditionalist or conservative Protestant congregations (including Southern Baptists), who make up nearly a third of religious congregations in the United States today.¹¹ Congregations from outside the broad Judeo-Christian tradition, including Mormon, Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu congregations, are present within faith-based organizing, but only minimally.

This particular mix of denominations appears to result from several factors. First, among Christian denominations, they are the denominations most likely to have congregations located in core urban areas, which have faced serious socio-economic challenges in recent years and are the “home turf” of much faith-based organizing. Second, the Catholic bishops’ “Catholic Campaign for Human Development” (formerly CHD) has made funding for faith-based organizing a top priority for over 25 years; more recently, mainline Protestant and Jewish funding agencies have also funded this field extensively. Third, the African American, liberal and moderate Protestant, and Catholic (as well as the Jewish and Unitarian) theological, ethical, and scriptural traditions have included this-worldly socio-economic concerns within their core teachings for many years; this has led these traditions into involvement in social justice issues of many kinds, including faith-based organizing. The relative absence of traditionalist Protestant involvement – despite the extensive presence of these groups in the American religious landscape – appears to result from their stronger emphasis on issues of personal morality and their discomfort within the cultural milieu of faith-based organizing, which they have often experienced as predominantly Catholic/liberal Protestant. Finally, in some cases – most notably that of suburban Southern Baptists – traditionalist Protestant congregations are made up of more affluent members than the typical congregation involved in faith-based organizing, but this in no means the case for all traditional Protestants.

In addition to the particular efforts represented by faith-based organizing, a wide array of social justice organizing projects in the U.S. are based in or include linkages to faith communities. Historically, the paradigmatic example of such efforts is the massive movement for the civil rights of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, which can only be understood in relation to the institutional strength of the black church in the American South (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984). More contemporary examples include: (1) initiatives around particular social justice issues within a single religious denomination (anti-racist work within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the promotion of women’s ordination within the Roman Catholic Church (Dillon 1999); efforts in a variety of denominations to reduce discrimination against gays and lesbians in American society; advocacy by the Catholic bishops in favor of an “option for the poor,” “living wage” legislation, and workers’ rights (Coleman 1991); (2) secular issue-focused movements with substantial ties to faith communities (affordable housing, immigrant rights groups, peace groups, efforts to protect the environment and/or fight “environmental racism,” human rights work, efforts to promote business ethics and corporate accountability, etc.); and (3) substantial efforts by segments of the labor movement to build support in local communities, often through religious congregations (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1995;

Bronfenbrenner 1998; Rose 2000; Voss and Sherman 2000; see also the AFL-CIO statement at www.aflcio.org/unioncity). Due to the size, scale, resources, and political capacity of the labor movement, the latter outreach efforts may be particularly important. Though this essay focuses on the specific model of faith-based community organizing discussed above, these wider efforts form a crucial part of religious believers' efforts to promote social justice in America.

Democratic Implications of Faith-Based Community Organizing:

The sheer scale and political efficacy of faith-based organizing suggest that it may have important implications for democratic life in the United States in the years ahead. But scale, efficacy, and even democratic intentions do not guarantee that a movement will foster democratic life. Historically, some large scale, effective, and avowedly democratic movements have fostered democracy (e.g. the women's suffrage and abolitionist movements in the U.S.; the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa; movements for Irish independence and democracy in Eastern Europe; the FMLN guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador), while others have been obstacles to it or ultimately fostered tyranny (e.g. the Russian Bolshevik movement; some of the anti-colonial and national liberation movements in Africa; the movement for Hutu rights in Rwanda; Sendero Luminoso in Peru). Assessing the democratic potential of this movement, then, requires going beyond descriptive work to look more analytically at its possible democratic implications. Six areas of recent scholarly analysis are important in this regard:

First, recent work on how Americans acquire the civic skills that contribute to their political effectiveness suggests that its link to religious congregations may give faith-based organizing greater democratic import. This is so because religion diffuses in an egalitarian fashion "democratic skills" such as the ability to write a letter to a political representative, make a public speech, attend a meeting, or plan and lead a meeting (Verba 1995). Though these are essential democratic skills, they are not simply natural attributes of citizens; they are learned abilities and inclinations. Verba and colleagues studied the three kinds of "pre-political settings" in which people in American society typically learn these skills: the workplace, non-political voluntary organizations, and religious organizations. The first two offer the most abundant learning opportunities, but those opportunities are badly skewed in favor of those who already enjoy the most socio-economic advantages: men rather than women; those with the highest salaries, most education, and family wealth rather than those with less of these; and whites rather than African Americans and Hispanics. Only religious organizations offer opportunities for democratic skills-acquisition in egalitarian ways: to women as much as to men; to the socio-economically disadvantaged as much as to the well off; and to African Americans even more than to white Americans.¹² Faith-based organizing thus taps into a rare institutional arena in which poor, working, and lower middle class families are on relatively equal democratic footing with upper middle class and wealthy families.¹³

Second, recent work by political sociologists, (Casanova 1994; Wald 1987), political scientists (Leege and Kellstedt 1993), and practitioners (Coleman 1991; Reed 1996) has demonstrated that religion has not in any simple sense succumbed to pressures toward privatization. Rather, religion in the U.S. and elsewhere has maintained a vital public presence around a variety of issues and in diverse political settings. Faith-based community organizing represents another facet of this public face of religion, but with a twist: Rather than concentrating on the issues of individual morality that have provided the focus of much public religion in the United States in recent years, faith-based organizing focuses on building greater democratic participation and social justice explicitly tied to the economic self-interest and quality of life of those on the lower end of the economic spectrum of American and British society – in keeping with important themes in Catholic, historic black Protestant, and mainline Protestant theology and social teaching. If one accepts, following much democratic thinking from the founding fathers of the United States down to the present, that strong economic polarization contradicts democratic ideals and undermines democratic practice, then this public face of religion in favor of economic justice carries important pro-democratic implications.

Third, scholars of grassroots political culture in the United States have documented the central role of cultural dynamics within social institutions, democratic organizations and civil society (Bellah 1985; Bellah 1991; Demerath and Williams 1992; Lichterman 1996; Eliasoph 1998; Williams 1999a; Williams 1999b). More specifically, Stephen Hart (2001) argues that conservative political movements have been much more adept than liberal/progressive movements at doing the “cultural work” to link their priorities to the religious traditions that shape Americans’ moral commitments – despite the fact that, as Hart argues, the religious traditions of American life have at least as many resources for supporting progressive political positions as for supporting more conservative ones. Those most committed to the economic well-being of working people have simply failed to do the cultural work to link their agendas to the moral-religious currents flowing in American history. Hart cites faith-based organizing as the best example of progressive organizations doing this cultural work relatively successfully, albeit with important limitations.

Likewise, Wood (1999) examines how the cultural dynamics within democratic movements strengthen or undermine their political outcomes. He argues that – at least within relatively democratic political regimes – those outcomes are strongly conditioned by the organizations’ ability to simultaneously (1) contest dominant political power, and (2) enter into compromise with political elites. Wood analyzes the efforts of faith-based organizing and other democratic movements to balance these contrasting cultural demands of democratic politics. Simultaneously sustaining both cultural challenges of contestation and compromise represents a difficult task; religious traditions represent one source of the cultural resources and complex worldviews necessary for meeting these challenges. Faith-based organizing has institutionalized the organizational relations between congregations and its own federations in a kind of “structural symbiosis” (Wood 2001) that helps it meet both challenges. In other words, from its relationship with congregations, faith-based organizing draws the complex cultural resources that allow it to make simultaneous sense of both conflict and compromise in its political work; in turn, when done well faith-based organizing gives back to those congregations leaders with better-developed skills and a deeper understanding of the public dimensions of religious faith. Thus, when Father Joseph Justice of Santa Ana, California said in an interview that organizing had benefitted his parish, and was whether he would work with faith-based organizing in the future, he noted:

I [would] look for certain things. Are the organizers coming in with an agenda or are they looking for what are the needs? PICO certainly was looking for what are the needs here. And they have fulfilled what they said they would do, which is build relationships and develop lay leaders.

Fourth, faith-based organizing may provide some antidote to a key weakness in civil society in the United States in recent decades: the erosion of American society’s store of “social capital” (Warren 2001; Wood forthcoming). Social capital refers to the quantity and quality of ties between individuals, through both personal networks and voluntary associations. Though the concept of social capital continues to be hotly debated, most observers agree that strong social capital allows people to work together more efficiently (for both positive and negative goals). Historically, American society has been particularly rich in social capital, which has provided the basis for political movements and voluntaristic efforts to ameliorate various kinds of social problems. But Robert Putnam (Putnam 2000) has amassed impressive evidence documenting a significant decline in American social capital over the last four decades; he argues that this erosion of social capital bodes poorly for the future of American democratic life.

Understanding how faith-based organizing may provide an antidote to this erosion requires making a distinction between two kinds of social glue holding people together in society “bonding” and “bridging” social capital (Gittell 1998; Putnam 2000, p. 24). Bonding social capital links people *within* communities together, fostering social trust and cohesion among people within a neighborhood, town, religious congregation, racial or ethnic group, etc. Bridging

social capital links people *across* these kinds of communities, fostering social trust and cohesion between people and groups on opposite sides of social divides (black and white; Hispanic and African American and Southeast Asian; Protestant, Catholic, Jew, and Muslim; rival gangs in adjacent neighborhoods, etc.). Religion has been an important source of bonding social capital throughout American history but, like other sources of social capital, has not functioned as effectively in building bridging social capital – thus, the common adage that “the most segregated hour in America is Sunday morning.” But faith-based organizing in many locations draws people from differing faith traditions, ethnic groups, and economic classes into shared efforts at political change – into social solidarity built upon shared democratic endeavor. In this way, it may provide an important source of bridging social capital and (to the extent it helps generate more vibrant religious congregations) it may contribute to rebuilding the store of bonding social capital in low- and middle-income American urban communities.

Fifth, faith-based organizing may compensate for a key structural weakness in American political institutions that appears to have worsened in recent years. Healthy democratic life depends upon the flourishing of what scholars call a “public realm” or “public sphere.” The public realm is made up of those settings in which people come together and talk about their common future, the problems facing society, and alternative solutions to those problems (Dewey 1954; Arendt 1958; Arendt 1972; Habermas 1989; Benhabib 1991). The public realm can be seen as overlaying three levels of society: (1) Government settings in which officials engage in discerning “public talk”; (2) settings of “political society” – that is, associations linked to but not part of government, such as political parties, the media, labor unions, and employers or professional associations when they transcend narrow self-interest; and (3) settings of “civil society” where people come together for a myriad of purposes beyond the control of government or corporate elites (Stepan 1988; Casanova 1994). Democracy can thrive where *both* (1) spaces exist for public deliberation at all these levels; *and* (2) institutions exist to connect public deliberation in civil society with that occurring in political society and government. That is, thriving democracy depends upon institutions providing “upward linkages” within the public realm, from grassroots civil society to more elite social sectors. One diagnosis of the ills of contemporary American democracy suggests that, whereas political parties, labor unions, and other associations once provided such linkages, the various levels of the public realm have become fractured from one another: Few connections exist between civil society, political society, and government, and those that do exist are primarily used by political and economic elites to project influence downward. Little pressure for accountability flows upward from civil society (see Wood forthcoming, drawing on Cohen 1992; Aldrich 1995; Coleman 1996; Wattenberg 1998).

If one accepts this diagnosis, faith-based organizing becomes particularly important as an example of a “bridging institution” projecting democratic power from civil society upward into the “political” and “government” levels of the public realm.¹⁴ To the extent it does so successfully and democratically – to the extent it “holds officials accountable” to real democratic needs – it compensates for the erosion of other political institutions that once served this function. It may also provide some model for how democratic activists can begin to build greater accountability into the modern political process more broadly.

Finally (*sixth*), recent studies of social movements have shown the crucial role of sophisticated and creative political strategy in determining whether such movements succeed or fail (Tarrow 1992; Ganz 2000a; Ganz 2000b). Numerous recent works describe the politically creative issue work, alliances, and strategies pursued by various sectors of the faith-based organizing movement, including the previously-cited work on the PICO California Project and the Texas IAF Network, Gamaliel in the Midwest (Kleidman forthcoming), and independent organizing in African American churches in Boston (McRoberts 2000). Interfaith Funders (2000) provides a more movement-wide description of strategic initiatives in this field.

Thus, faith-based community organizing offers inspiration and insight to those interested in the struggle for social justice in the contemporary world. This is true in part due to its scale: as

one of the largest and most broad-based movements for social justice in American life, it projects democratic influence in most large American cities, many congressional districts, and several politically-crucial states. But it is also true for analytic reasons: faith-based organizing provides one model for how democratic movements can meet some of the fundamental challenges to American democracy that analysts have identified: the widening income gaps between different sectors of American society, plus challenges regarding civic skills acquisition, the public face of religion, cultural dilemmas of progressive activists and democratic organizations, the erosion of social capital in American society, structural dilemmas of U.S. political institutions, and the challenge of strategic innovation for democratic movements.

Caveat:

In recognizing these strengths of faith-based community organizing, it is important to note that the field has significant shortcomings as well. Some are rooted in its own history and culture as a movement: The potential political influence of the field is undermined by the inability of the various networks to work together (albeit for reasons rooted in negative experiences in the past); these organizations have historically been loathe to collaborate with other democratic efforts (though this has changed in recent years in some parts of the country); some organizers are seen as condescending toward those outside their own organizations; and power and decision-making inside some faith-based organizations can be opaque and lacking in internal accountability.

Other shortcomings are rooted in constraints imposed by current American economic and political arrangements: Though better than in many social justice sectors, funding for faith-based organizing is rarely adequate; although it offers professional wages, the field has perennial difficulty attracting sufficient numbers of the multi-talented and dynamic people needed for long-term organizing success; and even the strongest statewide organizing efforts cannot begin to project sufficient power to affect the vast flows of financial capital that determine the life chances of working families in the global economy. Yet, at the margins of those vast flows of global capital, faith-based organizing offers a tool for promoting democratic engagement and improving the quality of life of working families in ways that matter – and matter profoundly for those living without good jobs, health insurance, decent housing, excellent schools, or clean air and water.

The Role of Religion in the Struggle for Justice:

What, then, do we know regarding the contribution of religion to struggles for social justice? On one hand, religion can help provide some of the things every social movement needs: people to help lead the movement; material resources such as money, phones, meeting space, etc.; and social capital and organizational structures that facilitate mobilization. Religion represents one among many possible sources for all these. More specific to religion are other factors: complex cultural resources that can simultaneously undergird both contestation and compromise; symbols, images, and stories that motivate and provide meaning for the struggle (the Exodus story, the Jewish social prophets, Jesus' confrontations with irresponsible authority, the Jewish mystical tradition of "repairing the world," Islamic understandings of the just community, etc.); legitimacy in the eyes of the wider society; a sense of primary community separate from the struggle that unburdens the organization from needing to provide primary social support for participants. Religion, at least under some circumstances, may be especially adept at providing these.

But Bellah's classic statement (Bellah 1970) suggests perhaps the most fundamental contribution of religion to struggles for social justice. He argues that religion, in fostering the spiritual dimension of human life, pulls people out of their embeddedness in the status quo of society, allows them to gain critical distance from it, and helps them to imagine alternatives to current social arrangements. In so doing, religion provides ethical leverage against the taken-for-grantedness that leads people to accept unjust social situations.

Conclusion: Religion and Social Justice:

Although a hundred years ago it appeared to some observers (Lenin 1929; Gramsci 1968, 1975) that the struggle for economic justice in the world would be led by vanguard political parties representing the interests of workers – in isolation from religion and perhaps against the opposition of religious institutions – there can be little doubt today that such a vision was always an illusion. People of faith are deeply engaged in the struggle for justice in societies around the world, very often (though by no means always) with the official support of their religious leaders and institutions. One model for such engagement, faith-based community organizing in the United States, has provided the focus of attention for this chapter, due to its scale, political efficacy, and organizational symbiosis with congregation-based forms of religion. But whether one looks to Protestants, Catholics, and Jews engaged in faith-based organizing in working-class neighborhoods of the U.S., secular labor leaders reaching out for support from diverse religious congregations throughout the Anglophone world, Hindu untouchables organizing politically in India, liberationist Catholics or reform-minded Pentecostals fighting inequality in Latin America, anti-corruption community leaders shaped by the “theology of struggle” in the Philippines, or toward any of a myriad of other examples, religion remains central to struggles for justice throughout the world today. Any effort to turn our societies toward greater fairness for working people – and any scholarly effort to better understand those struggles – must take people’s religious commitments seriously indeed.

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². The author attended the action as a researcher/observer and verified the actual attendance figures through a count of the seating capacity at the Sacramento Community Center Theater plus a large overflow room filled when chairs ran out at the main venue. The large crowd made it impossible to calculate a precise ethnic breakdown of attendees; the figures cited below are approximations done by the author by counting the “apparent ethnicity” of those seated in a representative set of floor sectors.

³. The key research groups on which PICO leadership relied for their healthcare campaign were the Health Insurance Policy Program, based out of the Center for Health and Public Policy Studies at UC-Berkeley and the Center for Health Policy Research at UCLA; and the Insure the Uninsured Project based in Santa Monica, California. The data quoted in this political event came from “The State of Health Insurance in California, 1999” report by the UCB/UCLA group (Schauffler and Brown 2000).

⁴. The closing lines from Amos also, of course, evoke the American civil rights movement and the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who used them frequently in his work – most memorably in his “I have a dream” speech at the March on Washington in 1963.

⁵. The best original sources are Alinsky’s own statements, *Rules for Radicals* (1971) and *Reveille for Radicals* (1969). For an excellent brief analysis of how this contemporary strain of radical democracy has influenced faith-based organizing, see Stephen Hart’s *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of engagement among grassroots activists* (University of Chicago 2001).

⁶. In its goals and ethos, this model is quite distinct from – and should not be confused with – the more familiar model of political mobilization adopted by the Christian Right over the last three decades. See the following accounts of community organizing: Harry Boyte *Backyard Revolutions* (1980) and *Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (1989), William Greider *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (1992), and Mary Beth Rogers *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Relations* (1990). Recent scholarly work includes Stephen Hart, *op cit.*, Mark Warren’s *Dry Bones Rattling* (Princeton University Press 2001), and my forthcoming *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America*.

⁷. Several factors account for the rather anonymous nature of faith-based organizing: First, though they indeed make up a coherent field of similar organizations engaged in similar practices and organized in an organizational field structured by the four networks, the 130 or so federations go by a diverse set of names so that one might move from one city to another and never know that the same organizing model is at work. Second, a large portion of the national-level publicity has focused on the Industrial Areas Foundation, thus blurring the perception of the wider field. Third, though the IAF or other groups have been mentioned frequently as examples of civic engagement (see Evans and Boyte 1986; Boyte 1989; Greider 1992; Lappe and Dubois 1994), until now relatively little work has focused close analytic attention on faith-based organizing. Fourth, faith-based organizing has largely escaped the attention of national political observers because until recently none of the networks were capable of operating in arenas of political power beyond local or county governments; the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation and the PICO California Project are the clearest examples to date of this new capability, but parallel efforts are underway in other states in all four networks.

⁸. These and the following data are from a forthcoming study sponsored by Interfaith Funders and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the first important study to gather data on the entire field of faith-based community organizing (Warren and Wood 2001). All figures listed are approximations, projected as follows: The study managed to locate and interview the directors of three-quarters of the organizing federations around the country that we could identify (network-affiliated or independent, with the criteria for inclusion being that they had to practice a form of organizing recognizable as faith-based community organizing and had to have

an office and at least one full-time staff member on the payroll at the time of the study). The numbers given in the text are then calculated from the 100 responding federations, projected to reflect the full universe of 133 federations nationwide, with the projection weighted by network to reflect differential participation. Numbers are rounded off, in order to reflect the projected nature of the data and methodological uncertainties.

⁹. The largest and most widely publicized of the networks is the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF); indeed, in the minds of casual observers faith-based organizing is often synonymous with the IAF, but in fact it incorporates a little more than a third of the more than 133 identified organizations. About 40% of the organizations are affiliated with the Pacific Institute for Community Organization or the Gamaliel Network (about a fifth of organizations each). Direct Action, Research, and Training (DART) represents about a tenth of identified federations. The remaining faith-based organizing efforts, a little more than a tenth of the total, are independent federations or members of smaller networks (Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations; Organizing, Leadership, and Training Center; Inter-Valley Project, etc.).

¹⁰. As of this writing (May 2001), these healthcare gains in California are at risk of being lost, due to the budget difficulties resulting from California's vast financial costs in meeting its energy needs in a deregulated utilities market.

¹¹. Christians Supporting Community Organizing, an organization based in Boulder, Colorado, is dedicated to trying to increase the involvement of evangelical, Pentecostal, and "Holiness" Christians in the work of faith-based organizing. They have done extensive training with congregations in these traditions, drawing on scriptural, theological, and ethical sources.

¹². Latinos do have fewer opportunities at democratic skills acquisition, apparently not due to systematic discrimination in churches but because they are disproportionately Catholic. Despite advances in lay participation and authority in recent years, Catholic Churches have apparently not, on average, caught up with Protestant Churches in opportunities for such skills acquisition.

¹³. This is not to suggest that religious congregations are in any sense fully egalitarian. They are not, in part because some grant implicit or explicit privileges to economic wealth and social status. The point here is that religious congregations are, *on average, relatively more egalitarian* than voluntary organizations or the workplace – at least in terms of offering opportunities for acquiring the civic skills examined by Verba, et al.

¹⁴. Despite the similarity of terminology, "bridging institutions" and "bridging social capital" refer to quite different phenomena. The latter refers to network ties between individuals in different social groups. The former refers to an organization-level phenomenon – that is, the existence of organizations and institutions that bridge the gaps across different vertical levels of the public realm, thus linking them into a more coherent and communicative whole.