

2009

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Recommended Citation

Wood, Richard L.. "Taming Prophetic Religion? Faith-Based Activism and Welfare Provision." *International Journal of Public Psychology* 3 (2009), 78-95 3, (2009): 78-95. http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/soc_fsp/21

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Taming Prophetic Religion? Faith-Based Activism and Welfare Provision

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Abstract

This article examines the current debate in the United States (primarily) and Britain regarding government-funded social service provision via faith-based institutions. By highlighting the tension between the 'priestly' and 'prophetic' roles of public religion, it argues for the critical importance of protecting religion's prophetic role even as society moves toward more extensive public financing of priestly social service provision. The article first outlines contemporary prophetic religion in the United States, especially faith-based community organizing (also known as broad-based community organizing) efforts, emphasizing three facets of the field: its scale, its role in building social capital, the issues it has addressed. Secondly, the article argues that, despite the narrow partisan tenor of recent faith-based social service provision in the US, it may have redeeming features that new leaders will want to preserve. However, H. R. Niebuhr's (1951) analysis of the relationship between religion and culture is invoked to characterize four key tensions between priestly and prophetic religion that may be exacerbated by governmental funding. The conclusion outlines several approaches through which practitioners, policymakers, the press, and scholars can help society maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of such funding.

Keywords

prophetic religion, priestly religion, faith-based community organizing, broad-based community organizing, faith-based initiative, religious social welfare provision

Among the key decisions facing governments in the United States and Britain is whether to continue recent national policies that promote religiously-based social service provision using government funds. Though this decision will garner less public attention than high-profile fights over international relations, economic recovery, and energy or health policy, this article argues that

it represents a key area of strategic decision-making with important long-term implications for the strength of democratic dynamics. Britain and the United States will both benefit from careful thinking about the risks and benefits of their policies on this terrain, in order to minimize the risks and maximize the rewards.

I do not approach this topic by analysing directly the American version of religiously-based social service provision, termed 'charitable choice' under the Clinton administration and dramatically expanded as the Bush administration's 'faith-based initiative'; others have provided such analyses.¹ Rather, this article strives to illuminate the tensions that exist between such policies and the historic role of religion as a source of governmental criticism and social reform. This dimension of the debate has been under-examined and should undergird governmental policy on channelling social services through religious institutions.

Prophetic Religion and Priestly Religion

Alongside the movement toward increased federal support in the United States for faith-based social service provision, the last twenty years have seen the dramatic expansion of faith-based political activism; or at least greater attention to such activism. Though at present often identified with the recently visible 'religious right', faith-based political activism has a much longer and broader presence in American history, including advocacy of temperance, the abolition of slavery, urban reform, the rights of labour, civil rights, public policy regarding abortion (both pro-choice and pro-life), the American commitment to Israel and more recently against intervention in Central America and Iraq and in favour of tax reform, school vouchers and 'living wage' laws. Roman Catholics, evangelical and mainline Protestants, Jews, Mormons, Unitarians, Muslims, Quakers and the whole variety of religious movements have at various points emphasized the public voice of their faith traditions

¹ For bibliographic sources on religiously-based social service provision utilizing government funds, see Ram A. Cnaan and Stephanie C. Boddie, 'Charitable Choice and Faith-Based Welfare: A Call for Social Work', *Social Work*, 47:3 (2002), 224–35; Francis Davis, Elizabeth Paulhus and Andrew Bradstock, *Moral, But No Compass: Government, Church and the Future of Welfare* (Cambridge: Von Hügel Institute, 2008) and the various analyses available at the website of the Rockefeller Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare, <http://www.religionandsocialpolicy.org/resources/effectiveness_resource.cfm>.

regarding political issues facing American society. Often, these religious voices have spoken critically of extant societal arrangements, raising what they have termed 'prophetic' objections to unjust or unethical arrangements. In so doing, they assert a role parallel to that of the social prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, held sacred by Jews, Christians, and Muslims; prophets who stood outside regnant power structures and judged them in the name of God's ethical mandates. This prophetic voice of religion represents a key source of democratic dynamism in American life; indeed to equate political activism with any one religious group or point on the political spectrum is to caricature American religious and political experience.²

Alongside this prophetic role of public religion, with its emphasis on criticizing taken-for-granted political and social arrangements, lies an equally important 'priestly' role of public religion that emphasizes meeting the needs of marginalized social sectors. Priestly religion makes religion public by providing social services to neglected children, immigrants, former prisoners, the unemployed, the drug-addicted and the downtrodden, while making communities of support available to all persons during difficult moments in our lives. Thus, both prophetic and priestly strands represent public religion, but the former emphasizes social justice and ethics while the latter emphasizes charity and social service.

Use of faith-based social service providers to channel government welfare funding may well strengthen the priestly dimension of public religion, and in some settings it may represent an efficient and effective way of providing government-backed services (the evidence is decidedly mixed in this regard, but on the whole it is positive).³ This article highlights the creative tension between the priestly and prophetic roles of public religion, and it argues for the critical importance of protecting the prophetic role even as society moves toward more extensive public financing of religion's priestly role.

² On the role of religion in the original rise of national social movements in American life, see Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

³ Credible studies of the efficacy and efficiency of faith-based social service provision in the US include Cnaan and Boddie, 'Charitable Choice and Faith-Based Welfare'; Sheila Suess Kennedy and Wolfgang Bielefeld, *Charitable Choice at Work: Evaluating Faith-Based Job Programs in the States* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2006) and Susan E. Grettenberger, John P. Bartkowski and Steven R. Smith, 'Evaluating the Effectiveness of Faith-Based Welfare Agencies: Methodological Challenges and Possibilities', *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work*, 25:3–4 (2006), 223–40. For a similar study in Britain, see Davis, Paulhus and Bradstock *Moral, But No Compass*.

Before embarking on that argument, however, I want to make my own stance regarding the faith-based initiative very clear: I am warily supportive of more extensive public financing of religiously-based social services. I am supportive because the neglect of disadvantaged social sectors in current public policy cries out urgently for redress, and because religious institutions bring particular strengths to bear in that effort; I am wary less due to concerns about religion's impact on social policy—I think that impact is often (though by no means always) positive—but rather because the prophetic vitality of religion may be undermined unless such initiatives are pursued very carefully. I also believe that the 'faith-based initiative' was never a serious attempt at substantially redressing social needs, at least in America. Rather, it appears to me to have been from the beginning the product of a narrowly electoral calculation; an effort to reward religious conservatives for their electoral support for the Republican Party, and one dimension of that party's ambitious strategy (designed by Karl Rove and others) was to create a 'permanent majority' by fracturing off significant sectors of the African American vote from the Democratic Party. The calculation appears to have been that large federal funding flows to African American churches under a conservative government would erode extraordinarily high levels of African American electoral support for Democratic candidates in recent decades. That effort has largely failed, at least in the immediate sense. In any case, despite its narrow partisan origins, there may be important redeeming features to the faith-based initiative that a new administration will want to preserve. In the conclusion, I will elaborate on what practitioners, policymakers, the press and scholars should keep watching in order to maximize the positive dimensions of this initiative. First, I pay close attention to the priestly and prophetic roles of religion, drawing on theology, social science and political analysis to inform my argument.

To begin, I note that we have already taken a first step: to identify explicitly both a prophetic and a priestly role of religion within society is already to say a great deal, for it carries us well beyond an overly-narrow and overly-individualistic restriction of religion to a purely 'spiritual' role; a restriction widespread in contemporary culture in both its secularist and religiously-liberal varieties. More accurately, this step recognizes the spiritual role of religion as including priestly and prophetic work, in addition to its uncontroversial role in the 'care of souls'. This recognition is crucial, for it allows religion in the contemporary world to take on a role in both private and public life without departing from its traditional home turf as 'spiritual'; this is the thrust of the late Pope John Paul II's regular assertion that the Catholic church's 'expertise in humanity' gives it an appropriate voice in addressing a

wide range of political and ethical issues, as well as being the impetus behind frequent forays by diverse religious institutions into specific policy domains.

The language of 'priestly' and 'prophetic' comes down to us in contemporary society from the Jewish Scriptures, in which both roles are centrally constitutive of true worship, but similar understandings can be discerned in other faith traditions as well. Thus, that diverse faith communities choose to engage in social service as priestly work, or in political activism as prophetic work, is fairly uncontroversial; that government might choose to foster these roles is certainly more controversial, but well within the self-understanding of the faith communities themselves. Whether such a role for government lies within the self-understanding of a pluralist and democratic nation is of course what the ongoing debate is about.

Prophetic Religion in American Society Today

The prophetic role of religion remains crucial in American society, not just historically, but today in confronting the full variety of domestic and international issues, prominently including global warming, the Iraq war, homosexual rights and the 'defence of marriage', the civil rights of immigrants and so on. Yet it has been perhaps most prominent in confronting one of the perennial crises of American society; the growing gulf between rich and poor, including the recent abandonment of the poor by government policy and the slippage of the middle class toward economic insecurity.

This ethical and religious critique of poverty policy occurs through a variety of channels: from sermons in local congregations to adult and children's education programs in evangelical churches; from specific legislative proposals advanced by the bishops' 'Catholic conferences' based in most state capitals to high-profile statements issued by denominational authorities. One of the more widespread and effective prophetic faces of religion in American life, albeit a rather unknown one, draws on diverse religious congregations to challenge political authorities to serve working families. In most major American metropolitan areas there can be found an organization engaged in what scholars call 'faith-based', 'broad-based', or 'congregation-based' community organizing. Each metropolitan organization is typically affiliated with one of four national networks (The PICO National Network, the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Gamaliel Foundation or Direct Action, Research and Training) or any of several regional networks (including The InterValley Project in New England and RCNO in southern California). Under the rubric of names like

the Washington Interfaith Network, ISAIAH in Minnesota, the San Francisco Organizing Project, Greater Boston Interfaith Organization or PACT in Miami, in about 150 cities around the country members of churches, synagogues and mosques are engaged in faith-based community organizing.⁴ Similar organizations also operate in Britain and have recently been launched in such diverse settings as Central America, Rwanda and South Africa.

In the United States, these are among the most effective organizations advocating for poor to middle class communities around such issues as economic development, funding for public education, police reform, affordable housing, access to medical care and living wage laws. They do this by drawing on the social networks and leadership skills embedded in African American, Latino, white and multiracial congregations to build what they call 'non-partisan power organizations' to negotiate with political and economic elites. In order to argue for the importance of faith-based organizing within contemporary efforts to deepen democracy—and thus the importance of assuring that faith-based social service provision does not undermine such faith-based organizing—I next outline three aspects of the field: its sheer scale, its role in building social capital in urban America and the issues it has already addressed.

The Scale of Faith-Based Organizing

Faith-based community organizing (FBCO) is a national phenomenon reaching broadly into (mostly urban) American congregations and communities. In 1999, when the only truly national study of the field was done, there were 133 full-fledged FBCO organizations active in thirty-three states across the country, including most of the crucial electoral battlegrounds nationally.⁵ A typical FBCO organization had a budget of \$150,000 per year and thirty member

⁴ Stephen Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement Among Grassroots Activists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Paul Osterman, *Gathering Power: The Future of Progressive Politics in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Heidi Swarts, *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-Based Progressive Movements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁵ Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren, 'A Different Face of Faith-Based Politics: Social Capital and Community Organizing in the Public Arena,' *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 22:6–54 (2002).

institutions, twenty-seven of which were religious congregations; although some have more than a hundred institutional members. Overall, the FBCO field incorporated about four thousand official institutional members of which 87.5% were religious congregations and 12.5% were non-congregational institutions like unions, schools and other community organizations.

Leadership participation figures provide a further entry point for assessing the scale of faith-based organizing. Over a typical eighteen-month period, FBCO as a field draws some 24,000 people into a significant leadership role; defined by survey respondents as 'core leaders' actively involved in day-to-day organizing efforts. Finally, in 2001 the field employed some 460 full-time professional organizers. Observers of the field uniformly report that all these figures are higher today, with anecdotal accounts suggesting growth of between ten and twenty percent since the data were gathered.

These numbers suggest at least some potential for FBCO to play a significant role in the public sphere. We need to consider, then, the extent to which FBCO organizations actually project power in their local political arenas. Warren and I assess this by looking at the highest reported attendance at a political action sponsored by respondent organizations. Though raw numbers such as these do not directly measure these organizations' full political capacity, they are a rough measure of one key determinant of that capacity; that is, their mobilizing capacity.

Table 1.⁶ Projecting Power: Highest Attendance at Political Actions Sponsored by Local Organizations

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

In our report we interpret these data as follows:

In virtually any city in the country, an organization that can mobilize more than 1,000 people to a public action with a focused agenda and reasonably skilled

⁶ Wood and Warren, 'A Different Face of Faith-Based Politics' (2002).

leadership can be expected to have powerful influence upon local political decision-making at least on some issues; about a quarter of FBCO organizations report this level of political capacity. Organizations with the political capacity to mobilize many hundred supporters around a focused policy agenda can likewise be expected to carry significant influence upon local political decision-making; more than a third of FBCO organizations report this level of political capacity. We would expect the political capacities of groups mobilizing up to a few hundred supporters to depend greatly on other factors. In any case, these data suggest—though they do not prove—that through FBCO organizations, American religious congregations operating in a prophetic mode can and do project quite significant influence up into the decision-making processes in municipal governments.⁷

More recently, Heidi Swarts reached a similar conclusion regarding the political impact of faith-based organizing.⁸

Social Capital and Faith-Based Organizing

A second aspect of faith-based community organizing involves its contribution to generating social capital in American society, especially 'bridging' social capital; that is, ties that link people and groups with those that are unlike them. Whether we consider cross-racial ties, ties between adherents of differing religious traditions or ties between recent immigrants and more established Americans, such links are scarce in the contemporary United States. The resulting balkanization of American communities weakens the society's democratic foundations.

Religious congregations appear to be effective in building up 'bonding' social capital within their communities; indeed, this is part of what makes them effective bases for faith-based organizing.⁹ Furthermore, federal funding for religious social service provision may help strengthen this 'bonding' role of religious congregations in fragmented communities. Yet if such bonding social capital is not complemented by bridging social capital linking dissimilar religious traditions, religion may exacerbate societal tensions by strengthening exclusivistic in-group identities. Importantly, though congregations are better at building social ties across economic classes, they do not do terribly well at building bridging social capital between religious traditions, despite efforts at

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Swarts, *Organizing Urban America*.

⁹ Wood, *Faith in Action*; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*.

strengthening ecumenical and interfaith relations.¹⁰ Perhaps there is no particular shame in this, as neither do most other institutions.

However, in this regard faith-based organizing comes into its own; it appears to be unparalleled in its capacity to build social capital that bridges races and ethnic communities, religious traditions and the immigrant-native divide. Racially, around thirty-five percent of participating institutions in 2001 were predominantly African American, thirty-six percent were white, twenty-one percent were Hispanic and seven percent were interracial.¹¹ This tri-racial structure alone makes the FBCO field quite exceptional within American civil society, so often divided along racial lines. About eleven percent of the FBCOs were predominantly made up of immigrants; a number that may well be higher today, with continuing high levels of immigration into the United States. FBCO's ability to transcend racial barriers may also be of interest to European and other societies, which are increasingly experiencing deep racial-ethnic divides of their own.

A second measure of diversity is critical because FBCO does not operate as a unified national field. The primary locus of FBCO political action is local, and so it is important to know whether it bridges sectors within the local arena, where most participants actually experience the organizing effort, or only in the national aggregate reported above. Only if the former holds does FBCO in fact foster significant bridging social capital within participants' daily lives. Warren and I also examined FBCO local racial composition and found that FBCO groups do work to forge multiracial ties within their local political arenas.¹² Although eleven percent of the eighty-two local organizations surveyed were monoracial and five percent had one racial group that was dominant (more than eighty percent of participating institutions from one racial/ethnic group), forty-three percent were biracial (two groups more than fifteen percent) and thirteen percent were multiracial (three or four groups with more than fifteen percent representation). Furthermore, the monoracial groups were evenly divided among white-dominant, black-dominant and Hispanic-dominant organizations. Thus, American FBCO organizations appear to build cross-racial bridging social capital extensively and systematically; furthermore, ethnographic accounts note that this social capital is often

¹⁰ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren, 'A Different Face of Faith-Based Politics: Social Capital and Community Organizing in the Public Arena', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 22 (2002), 6–54, table 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, table 3.

built upon social dynamics that foster cross-racial relations of frankness and mutual respect that are rare in American social life.¹³

These data focus on cross-racial social capital, but another kind of bridging social capital may also be important. Prophetic religion as represented by faith-based organizing also builds significant cross-religious social capital. Nationally, the FBCO field bridges religious institutions across three main categories: Roman Catholics (thirty-three percent of participating congregations); liberal and moderate Protestants (thirty-three percent, made up mostly of Lutherans, United Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and members of the United Church of Christ); historic African American Protestants (twenty percent, including Missionary, American, National and Primitive Baptists; the African Methodist Episcopal and AME-Zion denominations) hold approximately a sixteen percent share. Wider religious presence includes Jewish, Unitarian-Universalist and black Pentecostal congregations; each constitutes about a two percent share of the total in 1999, and all appear to have grown significantly since then. More widely, it becomes a story of religious absence, however: non-Black evangelicals (especially the large Southern Baptist Convention), Muslims, Mormons, Buddhists and other religious groups participate only in very isolated instances or not at all.

Given the risks of isolation of and potential discrimination against Muslim communities, one might wish for greater integration of *masjids* (mosques) into this work, but this has not occurred to any significant degree in the US, perhaps due to the *masjids*' focus on internal community issues, the generally high social status of Muslim American citizens and immigrants and/or the predominantly Christian cultural tenor of FBCO organizations. The potential of this model to integrate Muslims, however, is indicated by anecdotal accounts of the experience of Islamic communities within FBCO work in Britain; though these accounts still require scholarly documentation, Islamic communities do appear to be a significant constituency for this work in London and elsewhere.

Together, the data show how religion in its prophetic mode—exemplified here by faith-based community organizing—contributes powerfully to building bridging social capital in America across races, across the divide that sometimes isolates immigrants from the societal mainstream and across religious traditions.

¹³ Osterman, *Gathering Power*; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*; Swarts, *Organizing Urban America*.

Issue Work in Faith-Based Organizing: Advocacy by Grassroots Communities

In the 1999 survey, faith-based organizers were asked an open-ended question regarding 'what kind of issues' their organizations had addressed in the last two years. Their most common responses grouped into five broad categories. First, education/schools: public school reform, after-school programs, teacher home visits, site-based management, reading in schools, in-school suspension policy, tutoring, charter schools, safe schools. Secondly, economics: economic development, living wages, human development tax, worker rights, workforce development, immigration rights, first source hiring, sweatshops, minority hiring. Thirdly, housing: affordable housing, senior housing, *colonias* (poverty housing in Border States, mostly working on deed conversion, water access and waste removal). Fourthly, policing: community policing, gang violence, drugs and crime, anti-police-abuse, more police presence, restorative justice, gun control, police relations. Fifthly, healthcare: expanded access to healthcare for children, working families and immigrants, public health infrastructure.

While these five issue areas are vague enough that they might represent low-level work requiring only a minor degree of political power, we know from case studies that the stronger FBCOs engage in significant structural reform.¹⁴ Since until recently scholars have tended to research the more successful and advanced cases of FBCO, their findings should be interpreted not as representative samples of the field's political influence, but rather as showing the field's general potential. Recent accounts of higher-level organizing by current efforts within the large FBCO networks show these organizations increasingly projecting significant power to the regional, state-wide and national levels on such issues as healthcare, living wage initiatives, housing and restructuring regional economic flows.¹⁵ However, such studies also offer sobering evidence of the limitations of organizing, at least in the face of current political structures and economic crises.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics*; Osterman, *Gathering Power*; Swarts, *Organizing Urban America*; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*; Wood, *Faith in Action*.

¹⁵ Robert Kleidman, 'Community Organizing and Regionalism', *City and Community*, 3 (2004), 403–421; Richard L. Wood, 'Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing', in Marion Orr, ed., *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007), pp. 164–92.

¹⁶ Richard L. Wood, 'Raising the Bar: Organizing Capacity in 2008 and Beyond', report for the Neighborhood Funders Group, Washington, DC on the experience of PICO-California; Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling* on the Texas IAF in its heyday, before it was eviscerated by the rightward shift in Texas politics.

Taken as a whole, PICO's experience in California and the IAF's experience in Texas; recent work on healthcare reform by FBCO organizations in Massachusetts and by PICO in Colorado and nationally; and President Barack Obama's background in this form of community organizing together demonstrate the dynamism of prophetic religion. Such efforts thus remain central to the political dynamism of American society, due to FBCO's broad role in generating bridging social capital and its issue work in advancing democratic interests in a polarized society. Yet these same exemplars also demonstrate the vulnerability of prophetic religion to being undermined by power dynamics in the broader political arena. Thus, protecting the prophetic role of religion represents an important public policy interest for religious, political and other institutional leaders as we broaden federal funding of religious social service providers.

Prophetic and Priestly Religion: Potential Contradiction within a Creative Tension

That federal funding for social service provision might undermine the prophetic role of religion is not obvious; after all, religious traditions have sustained both prophetic and priestly roles in diverse societies and times. To understand the potential contradiction, we must recognize that, in order to attain the kind of political capacity and public profile outlined above, faith-based organizations have placed political conflict and building organizational power at the centre of their organizational cultures. That is, these organizations have achieved their significant gains by negotiating directly with political and economic elites; they have arrived at that negotiating table not through the good will of elites but by building power internally within their organizations and entering into the conflictive political arena, insisting that their voices be heard and demanding access to the negotiating table. Though the best community organizing today has left behind the one-dimensionally conflictive tactics of the later years of Saul Alinsky, in favour of striving for greater power and a more constructive role in shaping government policy, conflict remains an important political tool for all such efforts. To the extent community organizing continues to represent the interests of marginalized communities and working class or poor families, the route to an organization's place at the negotiating table is likely to entail some degree of political conflict.

Government funding of congregationally-based social services might undermine the ability or willingness of congregations to engage in necessary political conflict, in any of several ways. First, congregational energy and capacity are

never infinite, as anyone committed to a faith community surely knows. Limited energy and capacity might be gradually diverted away from political engagement and advocacy for long-term public policy change toward the day-to-day struggles to staff and run social service programs. Secondly, the relations between congregation members of differing social status might shift from that of relative peers—all equal in the sight of God, at least in principal—to the openly hierarchical patron-client relations typical of social service agencies, with clients presumed to be ‘in need’ in ways that agency staff are not. Thirdly, in cities where political patronage dynamics are strong, political incumbents may explicitly or implicitly tie ongoing social service funding to a pastor’s political support, and they may cut off funding for congregations that support more prophetic challenges to political initiatives or that too vociferously demand a public voice.

The first two possibilities above would subtly erode the prophetic current of religion, while the last option would do so more directly. At present, we do not know how widespread these dynamics are, nor indeed whether they are occurring at all; but politics and congregations being the imperfect vehicles that they are, caution is surely justified. Whether subtle or not, political strings on public monies are to be expected, unless funding programs for the faith-based initiative are administered in ways that create firewalls against them. How such firewalls are best built is a matter for those with the relevant policy design expertise, but the need for such firewalls is clear and increasingly urgent. Closer to my expertise is the question of how congregations can best understand their prophetic and priestly roles, and thus most effectively serve their members and the wider community. In entering this terrain, I note that decisions on whether a given congregation ought to solicit government funding, and how to combine such solicitation with its more prophetic ministries, are best left in the hands of religious leaders. Nevertheless, I would urge the following considerations.

The Role of Congregations: Organizing, Service, and Spiritual Nurturance

Fifty years ago, the Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr offered some categories useful for congregations and political leaders as they seek to understand the societal role of religion.¹⁷ Niebuhr outlined five models for how

¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

religion relates to its surrounding social milieu, using the shorthand of the relationship between ‘Christ and culture’. I here adopt his categories, but translate them to ‘religion and culture’ as appropriate for our pluralist setting. In Niebuhr’s first category, ‘religion against culture’, religion stands in a relationship of one-dimensional opposition to regnant social arrangements, condemning institutional patterns considered morally unacceptable and thus rejected within a given religious ethic. The grave dangers of such a stance can be seen in the recent attacks on the World Trade Centers and the London underground, in that the contemporary rejection of modernity by some fundamentalists is a prime example of religion-against-culture. But we should not neglect the more positive dimension of religion against culture, such as the more limited case of the Latin American Catholic bishops’ rejection of torture and military dictatorship as ‘institutionalized sin’, monastic critiques of the cultural excesses of consumerism and the widespread concern of diverse religious voices regarding the state of the family in western societies. A familiar example of contemporary religion-against-culture can be seen in the pro-life movement’s crusade against abortion access in America and in liberal religious condemnation of societal homophobia. Whether or not one agrees with any particular such stance, religion against culture represents a particular kind of religious critique of society, one which sometimes increases our democratic dynamism.

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

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

possible by the 1950s; yet something like this religion-over-culture stance underlies some elements of the restorationist project of the contemporary papacy under John Paul II and Benedict XIV. The key to the religion over culture stance lies in a religious tradition seeing itself in an overarching role as guide and overseer for cultural development. Conservative evangelicals, restorationist Catholics and, in an ironic parallel, sometimes secular cultural elites in the United States and Europe, orthodox Jews in Israel, and the *mullahs* (Islamic clergy) in Iran all sporadically appear to aspire to such a role.

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

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

Let me note frankly that, like Niebuhr, I hold a bias in favour of the religion-transforming-culture stance, but in fact all five patterns are legitimate

public stances for religion to take at certain moments, under criteria that the religiously-committed must ultimately assess for themselves (albeit they do so best when they listen to critical outsiders). Most importantly for our purposes here, religious communities must be free of constraints on when they can operate in each mode. Therein lies an important danger of the current faith-based initiative; it may weaken congregations' ability or willingness to operate in all of these modes, especially those more critical of current societal arrangements. To receive large amounts of government money is to risk domesticating the voice of religion, tying it too closely to prevailing institutions and cultural norms. As congregations and denominations navigate their way toward government funding for their social service, religious leaders will do well to keep this danger on their radar if we are to sail clear of its shoals.

We can thus discern four kinds of potential tensions between prophetic organizing and priestly social service provision that might be exacerbated by government funding for the latter. First, receipt of government money may make religious leaders less willing to risk alienating political patrons. Secondly, any deep investment of the human resources of congregations into social service provision may undercut potential investment of those resources in the prophetic ministries that congregations have long seen as part of their calling. Thirdly, the relations of (relative) peer accountability that develop within at least some congregations may be overtaken and replaced by the patron-client relations characteristic of social service agencies. Some of these congregational relations of accountability are horizontal (occurring between formally-equal congregational members) and others are vertical (occurring between pastors or lay leaders holding formal authority in the congregation and members 'under' that authority). Accountability potentially runs both directions in such relationships; they are thus quite different from patron-client relations. Finally, where resources are scarce and congregations are in high competition for adherents, as in the dense urban 'religious districts' studied by Omar McRoberts,¹⁸ federal dollars might tame or simply divert the prophetic religious voices that have historically been among our most articulate champions of social justice; those of the African American church tradition.

Given these dangers to congregations' vigorous pursuit of their prophetic calling, some articulate religious voices have spoken out against the Bush Administration's faith-based initiative. Yet the needs of disadvantaged sectors of American society cry out for redress and for support from within their own

¹⁸ Omar M. McRoberts, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

communities, from government, from congregations and from all of us. It appears that the next American president will in some form continue the faith-based initiative.¹⁹ In Britain, debate regarding this issue continues, but largely regarding the form under which government funding will occur; the major political players appear to endorse the concept of government-funded social services in principle. It thus appears, regardless of opposition from some quarters, that government-funded, religiously-provided social services will be part of American and British society for years to come. We have to consider, therefore, how best to proceed. Reasonable measures would include the following five points. First, religion's prophetic role should be protected from political interference, via enabling legislation and administrative policy that clearly codifies the autonomy of federal social service funding decisions from political calculations. That is, the faith-based initiative should be institutionally separated from the political apparatus of local, state and federal administrations, and the autonomy of those decisions should be enforced legally. Secondly, countervailing funding for prophetic ministries should be institutionalized to provide a counterweight to federal funding for priestly religion. Since, by its very nature, government funding of prophetic ministries blunts their cutting edge, such funding should not come from government. It might best be institutionalized in the funding guidelines of religious denominations, local community foundations and major funders of social initiatives in each society (including foundations and individual donors).²⁰ Thirdly, the societal pay-off to justify running these dangers should include a net positive gain for social service funding. That is, major new investment in social services should be made, as resources become available during the next economic recovery, to be sure that new faith-based providers do not simply undermine existing providers (secular and religious). Fourthly, policymakers should design enabling legislation with the knowledge that those holding majority power will one day

¹⁹ Republican John McCain, though apparently far less religiously-devout than either George W. Bush or Barack Obama, would presumably continue funding religion-based social service provision as a continuation of his Republican predecessor's policies and as an olive branch to his party's base of support in the religious right. On 1 July 2008, Democrat Barack Obama gave a major speech in Zanesville, Ohio endorsing a certain version of the faith-based initiative and detailing how he would continue it, see <http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/07/obamas_speech_on_faithbased_or.html>.

²⁰ Expertise on establishing funding priorities that support the prophetic dimension of public religion in the US is located in the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Needmor Fund, Interfaith Funders, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the California Endowment and the Sandler Foundation, among other venues.

be the minority. Thus, policies that enable governmental colonization of religion may well eventually rebound against those who today attempt to use religion for their partisan political ends. Finally and most broadly, the faith-based initiative should be seen as one aspect of a broader effort to rethink and redesign the relationship between the market economy and the rest of society; a thoroughgoing critique of "market fundamentalism"—the notion that unrestrained markets are always the best way to allocate resources—should lead to the transfer of national assets from the economy, narrowly understood, to societal institutions less tightly embedded in markets. Markets largely create the wealth that undergirds social thriving, but to do so they depend upon strong political and moral institutions. The latter sometimes require non-market decisions to generate resource flows and societal conditions that allow them to thrive.

The above surely do not exhaust the proactive and preventative measures that should be implemented, but they represent the direction in which enlightened policymakers should be leading society. The last point is perhaps the most important; balancing efficient market-based generation of wealth with non-market decision-making regarding the kind of society in which we wish to live, and creating resource flows in the appropriate sectors to create that kind of society, is ultimately the fundamental challenge of democratic life in the twenty-first century. The process of finding an appropriate balance will challenge policymakers at every level of domestic politics; it will be even more difficult at the international level, where few strong decision-making structures exist that can effectively deliberate regarding where such a balance might lie.

Both domestically and internationally, the balancing of market and societal needs will not occur once and for all. Rather, the future will entail a constant recalculation of that balance in decision-making venues including national and local governments, private philanthropists, non-governmental service providers, religious institutions and individual consciences (in their decisions in the voting booth and in daily life). Crucially, decisions will entail not only the right balance, but the design of institutions that can sustain a reasonable balance over the long-term; such is the very substance of democratic life in our time.