

## AFTERWORD

### Faith-Based, Then, Now, and Next

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Over the last quarter-century, Reverend Dr. Samuel K. Atchison, who I first met when he was the chief chaplain at New Jersey’s Trenton State maximum-security prison, has been among my dearest intellectual, civic, and spiritual partners. Together with Boston’s epic community-serving ministry duo, the Reverend Eugene F. Rivers, III and Dr. Jacqueline Rivers, and Philly’s Reverend Benjamin “Pops” Smith, Sam practiced the faith-based vision that I feverishly preached in academia, think tanks, and media and fast-pitched to mayors, presidential aspirants, and other policymakers in both parties.

As Sam knows, as late as the late 1990s, the term “faith-based” drew puzzled looks and blank stares. But, then as now, we used it to mean a “faith-friendly” but stubbornly fact-based approach to supplying “much-needed funds” and other vital supports to those who “labored on the front lines of poverty and social dysfunction,” an approach that needed to be buoyed by first-rate “moral, economic, and constitutional” public reasoning; backed by cutting-edge empirical research; blessed by “broad-based” bipartisan support;<sup>1</sup> and brought into being by people of all faiths and of no faith who would agree with card-carrying agnostic Benjamin Franklin’s dictum that “to pour forth benefits for the common good is divine.”

#### **The Devil’s in the Details (and still Working Overtime)**

Then as now, orthodox secularists who eschew all things religious and orthodox sectarians who respect no religion but their own were fierce but few, loud but lame. That is why, despite all the controversies, federal faith-based initiatives have survived multiple challenges in courts of public law and remained popular in courts of public opinion. Beneath most church-state conflicts there has been, and continues to be, either an underlying consensus, or a willingness to accommodate, bargain, and compromise, or both.

After burdening my religion and public policy students with less than scintillating academic studies spotlighting the underlying consensus on church-state issues, I used to tease them with “church-state quotes” from prominent public figures and ask them to guess “who said it?” Here’s an oldie but a goodie: “But I ask you, who is more likely to go out onto a street to save some poor, at-risk child than someone from the community, someone who believes in the divinity of every person, who sees God at work in the lives of even the most hopeless and left-behind of our children? And that’s why we need not to have a false division or debate about the role of faith-based institutions, we need to just do it and provide the support that is needed on an ongoing basis.”

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel K. Atchison, “New Faith-Based Frontiers,” in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 2.

George W. Bush? No; but, in July 1999, in his first major presidential campaign speech, G.W. Bush stressed that he believed “strongly in the separation of church and state,” and insisted that government “cannot be replaced by charities,” religious or other. Give up? The quote was from Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, speaking on December 17, 2001 at a New York City church. And who do you guess was in the gallery sitting next to First Lady Laura Bush during her husband’s first State of the Union Address? Answer: John Street, Philadelphia’s Democratic mayor, who delivered a 400,000-plus vote margin favoring Bush’s opponent, Al Gore. Street also joined G.W. Bush at a July 4, 2001 “block party” event in Philly celebrating the faith-based mentoring program that Sam referenced—a program that, thanks to Reverend Dr. W. Wilson Goode, Sr.’s leadership,<sup>2</sup> has since gone on to serve more than 350,000 children.

In *Godly Republic*, published in 2007, I ruminated about the research and initiatives that had defined “faith-based,” and outlined a “centrist blueprint for America’s faith-based future.”<sup>3</sup> Therein, I described Sam as a “clergyman who has been doing faith-based outreach both behind bars and among inner-city youth” since (in his words) he “tightened up my pastor’s collar.” Boiled down to its core, our shared vision for “faith-based” was as a movement to equip and empower, lionize and leverage, local community helpers and healers (also heralded as “armies of compassion” among Republicans and “paramedics of civil society” among Democrats) whose primary institutional affiliations (whether paid or volunteer) were religious, and whose primary program beneficiaries were the most truly disadvantaged urban children, youth, and families.

But, as Sam says, “the Devil got into the details;” or, as I might put it, the Devil was present before, during, and after the creation, started working overtime once the White House office was established, and has just kept right on attacking in different guises. Here’s one vintage guise: certain well-connected nonprofit leaders, both secular *and* religious, flush with government grants and contracts, flacking diabolically disingenuous church-state arguments and faux concerns about programs for needy people needing to be run by professionals—a cover for curtailing competition for government grants and contracts with no-name neighborhood ministries and other religious institutions that serve the least, the last, and the lost among us on shoestring budgets, and do so without well-paid, well-credentialed professionals sitting on their ethics in well-appointed office suites located nowhere near the people they supposedly serve.

### **90,000 Reasons for Faith-Based**

Of course, that does not answer the question posed by my dear friend, fellow Catholic Democrat, and favorite former Lieutenant Governor, the Honorable Kathleen Kennedy Townsend: “Why do we need a new White House Office of Faith-Based Programs?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> W. Wilson Goode, Sr., “Bush’s Faith-Based Program Helped the Children of the Incarcerated,” in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> John J. Dilulio, Jr., *Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America’s Faith-Based Future* (University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, “Government and Faith-Based Social Service: The Good & the Ugly,” in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 10.

I'll bite. We need such a White House office to help level the playing field for faith-based programs that, unlike the biggest and best religious nonprofits (Catholic Charities, Habitat for Humanity, Lutheran Social Services, the Salvation Army, Jewish Federations, and others), cannot easily garner public attention for their good works or win government grants or contracts. And we need it to help religious leaders, institutions, and communities recognize and respond to major threats to human well-being that afflict people of all faiths and of no faith.

For example, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), from August 2019 through August 2020, there were 88,295 drug overdose deaths, up 27 percent from the same 12-month period ending in August 2019. In December 2016, in response to a CDC report documenting 33,091 drug overdose deaths in 2015, the White House issued a press release regarding the “urgent need for treatment.” The nearly 90,000 lives lost to drug overdoses in 2020 represents a 267 percent increase over the 2015 tally that alarmed the White House.

How many lives lost to drug overdoses might have been saved had the “urgent need for treatment” inspired an expansion in federally supported faith-based drug prevention and intervention programs? In 2020, there were more than 19,000 gun-related homicides, up about 35 percent over 2019, and the worst one-year murder spike on record. How many lives lost to gun violence might have been saved by mobilizing and supporting faith-based “saviors of the streets” like those that contributed to public-private programs that made their marks in the 1990s and 2000s? And what long-term, life-saving difference might it make if a White House office advanced faith-based mentoring programs like the one that both Reverend Sam and Reverend Dr. Goode, Sr. reference in their respective essays?

In April 2007, I published an essay in *Time* magazine entitled, “From Sacred to Civic: How Faith-Based Groups Are Trying to Resurrect New Orleans.” It concluded by suggesting that my old White House office be relocated, lock, stock, and staff, to New Orleans, the better to bolster the region’s post-Hurricane Katrina human, physical, and financial recovery process. That did not happen; but, over the next ten years, diverse religious nonprofit organizations, led by Catholic Charities of New Orleans, did receive more White House attention, land more federal funds, and play a decisively important role in the recovery process.

We have, writes Sam, “gotten away from” what “was the defining vision” for faith-based and community initiatives;<sup>5</sup> and, he implies, we have done so at a time when our political polarization makes replenishing social and civic capital more important than ever. We need a faith-focused White House office to reanimate that vision, re-level the playing field, and address real problems in real time in a way that models compassion in truth and action.

### **Faith-Based Bright Spots**

Dr. Stanley Carlson-Thies is a blessing to me and to all others who are fortunate enough to know him. Stan is the faith-based man who helped to make the history that his stage-setting

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 1 above.

essay in this volume<sup>6</sup> dispassionately yet vividly chronicles: the 1996 federal Charitable Choice provision; the G.W. Bush faith-based office and its *Unlevel Playing Field* report; the Obama faith-based office's truest efforts to bridge differences; and more, all while producing critically important research and writing like that which he did with the late, great dean of faith-based studies, Dr. Stephen V. Monsma.<sup>7</sup> Stan expertly summarizes how federal faith-based initiatives evolved from Bill Clinton's second term, to Donald Trump's second-half term, to Joe Biden's first 100-days. The record is hardly all sunshine, but let's review the bright spots.

President Clinton endorsed Charitable Choice, the provision of the 1996 federal welfare reform law (Section 104) that permitted religious nonprofit organizations to compete for certain federal grants on the same basis as all other grant-seeking organizations provided that no tax dollars are used to proselytize, provide sectarian instruction, or conduct worship services; and, he established the first "faith-based center" in a federal cabinet agency, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In their respective and respectively splendid essays, my former G.W. Bush administration colleagues, and dear friends, Tim Goeglein<sup>8</sup> and Tevi Troy,<sup>9</sup> each capture important facets of what began as the 43<sup>rd</sup> president's signature domestic policy initiative. President G.W. Bush instituted a "faith-based office" in the White House, created satellite units at several cabinet agencies, and promulgated administrative rules that put religious nonprofits on a more level playing field in the federal grant-making process. He dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars to mentor hundreds of thousands of children of prisoners; and, he stimulated dozens of state and local governments to establish faith-based offices of their own (most still in service today).

President Obama affirmed the Clinton-Bush view that religious nonprofits can and should be welcomed, not walled off, as partners in social service delivery programs that are funded in whole or in part by government. He kept but recast the G.W. Bush office into the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, with a mandate to stimulate intergovernmental, public-private, and religious-secular partnerships to advance four goals: economic recovery, maternal and child health, responsible fatherhood, and interfaith dialogue and service. The Obama faith-based office worked hard to get religious nonprofits into the competition for American Recovery Act funding; and, Catholic nonprofit organizations, in

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Carlson-Thies, "The Biden Partnerships Plan is Faith-Based 5.0," in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 1, published originally by HistPhil, a web publication on the history of the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors; <https://histphil/2021/03/09/the-biden-partnerships-plan-s-faith-based-initiative-5-0/>; republished in Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based at 25*, by permission, for which PRRUCS is very grateful.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen V. Monsma and Stanley Carlson-Thies, *Free to Serve: Protecting the Religious Freedom of Faith-Based Organizations* (Brazos Press, 2015); also see Monsma, *Putting Faith in Partnerships: Welfare-to-Work in Four Cities* (University of Michigan Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Tim Goeglein, "George W. Bush and Domestic Policy: The Faith-Based Office at its Most Personal," in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> Tevi Troy, "Muddling the Faith-Based Concept," in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 11.

particular, received record amounts of federal funding during the Obama administration's first several years.

President Obama appointed Reverend Joshua DuBois, a wonderful young minister with a graduate degree in public administration from Princeton, to lead the office; he expanded federal faith-based centers at a dozen cabinet agencies (plus a "point of contact" at the Corporation for National and Community Service); and, he appointed the brilliant and big-hearted Dr. Melissa Rogers to succeed Josh (and now President Joe Biden has re-upped Melissa as his own first "faith czar"). The Obama U.S. Department of Agriculture's faith-based center was headed by the marvelous Max Finberg, a former chief of staff to the early faith-based movement's best friend in Congress, U.S. Representative Tony Hall, Democrat of Ohio. Working creatively through state and local government agencies, Max helped faith-based programs to supply summer meals to millions of low-income children.

As Stan recounts, President Trump, after his first 15 months in office, launched a "Faith and Opportunity Initiative," sans any White House office, but with an "Advisor to the Office of Public Liaison," a unit that exists to "mobilize public support" for the president. The Trump administration challenged Charitable Choice and other federal laws mandating that a federal program beneficiary be given an alternative to faith-based service provision. Despite all that, during the Trump years, the Clinton-Bush-Obama faith-based centers in the federal departments "continued functioning," and one laudably tried "to better engage faith-based organizations in the federal response to the opioids and mental health crises."

During the Clinton-Bush-Obama era, federal faith-based initiatives and partnerships were propelled by "sacred places/civic purposes" studies and "faith factor" research findings. It all began, really, with visionary work by A. Robert "Bob" Jaeger and Partners for Sacred Places (PSP), then as now the only national, nonsectarian nonprofit organization dedicated to sound stewardship and active community use of older religious properties.<sup>10</sup> For example, PSP engaged Penn's Ram Cnaan, a remarkable and internationally renowned Israeli-born social work scholar, to co-lead the work that resulted in the landmark PSP 1998 study, *Sacred Places at Risk: New Evidence on How Endangered Older Churches and Synagogues Serve Communities*. In cognate studies stretching into the mid-2000s, Cnaan documented how urban religious congregations served people of all faiths and of no faith, and conservatively estimated the "replacement value" of their services at about \$140,000 per congregation per year.<sup>11</sup>

Now, as the Biden administration takes shape, all the latest, best, and most methodologically refined empirical analyses peg the social, civic, and economic value of faith-based programs even higher than it was pegged in the first-generation studies. Back to Partners for Sacred Places, which, in 2016, working once again in concert with Penn's Cnaan, released a landmark report, *The Economic Halo Effect of Historic Sacred Places*. The research, conducted on congregations in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Forth Worth, found that the average, community-

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<sup>10</sup> Partners for Sacred Places: <https://sacrdplaces.org/>

<sup>11</sup> For two examples, see Ram A. Cnaan, *The Other Philadelphia Story: How Local Congregations Support Quality of Life in Urban America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

serving older sacred place generates more than \$1.7 million annually in social, civic, and economic impact, and that nearly 90 percent of the beneficiaries of the community programs and events housed in urban churches, synagogues, or mosques are *not* members of the religious congregation that serves them. A cognate 2016 study, focused on Philadelphia’s Catholic community-serving hospitals, housing programs, and the like, found that the city’s Catholic institutions alone provided \$4.2 billion a year in benefits to people of all faiths and of no faith, a figure bigger than the city’s annual general fund (\$4 billion).<sup>12</sup>

Yet another 2016 study estimated the annual national economic value of all religious institutions to American society.<sup>13</sup> By the study’s most conservative metric, the tally was \$378 billion; by its middle-range metric, the total was \$1.2 trillion; and, by its least conservative metric, the figure was \$4.8 trillion. Even if one adopts the most conservative figure, quibbles with the calculations, and subtracts \$100 billion, the contribution of religion to American society tops a quarter-trillion dollars a year. That is about equal to what the nation spends annually to employ the entire, full-time federal civilian workforce that manages all federal programs including energy, environmental protection, Medicare, Social Security, and others.<sup>14</sup>

### **Faith-Based? How So?**

My good friend and colleague, Professor Marci Hamilton, author of the single most critical commentary on Stan’s essay, has done more than anyone else in America to end childhood abuse and neglect and challenge laws and policies that protect what she has defined as “extreme religious liberty.”<sup>15</sup> Marci’s main beef with Stan and his essay concerns how “institutional religious freedom” relates to LGBTQ rights. She claims that Stan “embraces the ‘right’ to discriminate against LGBTQ people in the delivery of government-funded services.”<sup>16</sup>

Enter Reverend Dr. Ronald J. Sider. I once characterized Ron in print as “economically illiterate” (he wasn’t), to which he replied that I was “theologically illiterate” (I was). In his essay, Ron proposes the “Fairness for All Act” as a possible way to square the circle on

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph P. Tierney, *How Catholic Places Serve Civic Purposes: The Archdiocese of Philadelphia’s Economic “Halo Effects”*, Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, University of Pennsylvania, November 30, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Brian J. Grim and Melissa J. Grim, “The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, Volume 12, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> John J. Dilulio, Jr., *Bring Back the Bureaucrats: Why More Federal Workers Will Lead to Better (and Smaller!) Government*, with Commentary by E.J. Dionne and Charles Murray (Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2014); and “Is the Federal Public Service Reform Still Possible? Toward a ‘Volcker Rule’ for Federal Contractors,” in James L. Perry, ed., *Public Service and Good Governance for the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), chapter 7.

<sup>15</sup> See CHILD USA: <https://childusa.org/management>, and Marci Hamilton, *God versus the Gavel: The Perils of Extreme Religious Liberty* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Marci Hamilton, “Where does it End? The Religious Demand for Government Support without Accountability to All Taxpayers,” in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 6.

institutional religious freedom and LGBTQ rights. “Perhaps,” he concludes, “my hope for a negotiated compromise is impossible.”<sup>17</sup>

Ron has worked miracles in the past. For instance, he got left-right evangelical Christian coalitions to forge a consensus on environmental protection (“creation care”); and, he got me and the late, great born-again Christian, and founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries, Charles W. “Chuck” Colson, with whom I had a supremely special but occasionally rocky friendship, to co-author a foreword to one of his books. Even though Catholics require just two miracles for sainthood, it will take another miracle for Ron’s “Fairness for All Act,” or any conceivable cognate legislative measure, to effect “a compromise that respects and protects the most basic concerns and values of everyone.”

What Ron references as “charitable pluralism” is certainly a good foundation on which to seek and find common ground. But Sir Isaiah Berlin, the twentieth century’s most profound prophet of pluralism,<sup>18</sup> taught that sometimes, even among and between the most reasonable and other-regarding souls, there simply is no way to reconcile multiple and competing values like those at stake and in play between Stan and Marci. For that very reason, however, it is more important than ever that each side hear out (not drown out) the other, cultivate empathy for the other, and—as Stan and Marci did several years ago when discussing the SCOTUS *Obergefell* same-sex marriage decision for the video record—disagree without being disagreeable.

Besides, pragmatically speaking, there is no winner-take-all option here. Recall, for example, the tense moments during the Obama administration’s dealings with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), moments when, for the first time, it seemed thinkable that the nation’s more than 600 Catholic hospitals and 1,600 long-term care facilities might actually cease to exist and serve people of all faiths and of no faith. And it was hardly “just the Catholics;” it was also large and small, national and local, community-serving religious organizations, ones representing many different faiths and supplying diverse health and human services to literally millions of people. In short, many were then contemplating “just doing worship services” unless they could retain or expand long-held exemptions to federal, state, and local anti-discrimination laws.

That understood, let’s remember that not all faith-based organizations and programs are freighted with the same institutional religious freedom issues. Indeed, *even when they do not receive penny one of government money*, most urban, community-serving religious organizations do not proselytize when delivering social services, and do not take religion into account either when serving needy people or when hiring those who serve them. For example, the aforementioned Stephen V. Monsma studied faith-based welfare-to-work programs in four cities and found that, even when not receiving any government money, only about 2.9 percent of them

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald J. Sider, “The New Faith-Based Office and the Case for Pluralism,” in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 9.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview, see Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy, “Isaiah Berlin,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 22, 2020, accessible at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berlin>



hired only co-religionists, and only another 6.9 percent gave them preference in the hiring process.<sup>19</sup> As I preached before the National Association of Evangelicals in March 2001, concerns about not being permitted to proselytize, “hijacked faith,” and the like are certainly legitimate, but they are not shared by all religious leaders and institutions, whether Christian or other, including not by all of those anchored in America’s most socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

Re-enter Ron, the book that he co-authored in 2005 with Heidi Unruh, *Saving Souls, Serving Society*, and its four-page “Typology of Religious Characteristics of Social Service Organizations and Programs.”<sup>20</sup> That table should preface every policy-minded debate and discussion about things “faith-based.” Delineated by a dozen different characteristics, the six types that Ron and Heidi fleshed out ranged from “faith-permeated” (explicitly religious activities, hire only or mainly co-religionists, etc.) to “secular.” Using Ron and Heidi’s typology, I used to ask students in my seminar on religion and public policy to “draw a line” on government funding: would you permit only “secular” organizations, go so far as “faith-permeated” ones, or permit secular plus either “faith-secular partnership,” “faith-background,” “faith-affiliated,” or “faith-centered” as well—and why? Try it for yourself!

### **More “Religious Independents,” But Nary a “None”**

The brilliant Professor Michele Margolis is the author of an award-winning book that I am not alone in considering to be among the most significant social science-anchored works on religion and politics published in the last quarter-century.<sup>21</sup> Michele’s superb essay demonstrates that “deep-seated political-religious divisions” exist, but so do forces favoring “bipartisan cooperation,” among them the “often glossed over” fact that the “Democratic Party is much more religiously diverse than many think.”<sup>22</sup> And the incisive essay by the award-winning journalist, and my dear friend, Jane Eisner, references “the increase in the number of Americans claiming no religious preferences at all—the so-called ‘nones’,” and prods us to ask whether this trend poses a real challenge to the future of “partnerships between government and faith institutions.”<sup>23</sup> Taken together, Michele’s and Jane’s respective essays moved me to take a closer look at the so-called “nones,” and to ponder whether the conventional narrative about them exaggerates political-religious divisions.

I began by harkening back to my late, great friend George H. Gallup, Jr. George, who died at age 81 in 2011, led the world-class survey research organization created and named for

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<sup>19</sup> Monsma, *Putting Faith in Partnerships*, op. cit.; also see Dilulio, *Godly Republic*, op. cit., pp. 177-179, and 295.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald J. Sider and Heidi Unruh, *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 110-113.

<sup>21</sup> Michele Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Michele Margolis, “Religion in the Public Square: Not So Divided After All,” in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 7.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Eisner, “Will the Decline in Faith Institutions Harm the Faith-Based Initiative?,” in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 3.



his father. Both figuratively and literally, George brought “Gallup Polls” into the twenty-first century, enhancing their rigor and expanding their reach beyond politics to religion and other topics. He was both deeply religious and deeply interested in religion. He was especially curious about how different religious beliefs arose, persisted, and changed, especially among youth and young adults; how they related to race, class, and other identities (“intersectionality” before the term); how they stimulated “saints among us”<sup>24</sup> (pro-civic and pro-social behaviors such as volunteering, community service, and charitable giving); and how the twenty-first century might witness “the next American spirituality”<sup>25</sup> even as organized religion receded.

George rooted for a robust faith-based future for America, but he was faithfully, even fanatically, fact-based when it came to all things faith-based. Thus, by the mid-1990s, George had already spied and spoken about the growing minority of Americans, particularly among young adults, who had increasingly tenuous ties or no ties at all to organized religion. As another dear friend of George’s, our Reverend Sam, can attest, lunch with George in his Princeton, New Jersey office would sometimes end with desert topped by George’s ruminations regarding how having no religious affiliation is *not* synonymous with having no religion, no religious beliefs, no religious practices, and no spiritual sensibilities. In 2007, the Pew Research Center conducted its first extensive survey on religion in America, dubbing it a “Religious Landscape Study.” By then, George was no longer concerned that the no-affiliation trend might be missed, but he was increasingly concerned that it might be mischaracterized as a no-religion trend.

As it turned out, George was right to be so concerned. In 2014, Pew conducted its second extensive survey on religion in America, and then released two reports summarizing its findings. The first, released in May 2015, focused on changing religious demographics; and, the second, released in November 2015, focused on changing religious beliefs and practices.<sup>26</sup> Pew reported that “the religiously unaffiliated” had risen from 16 percent of the adult population in 2007 to 23 percent of the adult population in 2014.<sup>27</sup>

The second Pew report’s title was “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” but the data and the details, the numbers and the narratives, contained in its 265 pages, were hardly all, or even predominantly, about “becoming less religious.” To cite just a few examples:

- “Among the roughly three-quarters...who *do* claim a religion, there has been no discernible drop in most measures of religious commitment. Indeed, by some conventional measures, religiously affiliated Americans are, on average, even more devout than they were a few years ago.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> George H. Gallup, Jr. and Timothy Jones, *The Saints among Us: How the Spiritually Committed are Changing Our World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> George H. Gallup, Jr. *The Next American Spirituality: Finding God in the Twenty-First Century* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Pew Research Center, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious: Modest Drop in Overall Rates of Belief and Practice, but Religiously Affiliated Americans Are as Observant as Before*, November 3, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 3 and 6, emphasis in original.

- “In fact, the majority of Americans without a religious affiliation say they believe in God.”<sup>29</sup>
- “The study also suggests that in some ways Americans are becoming more spiritual,” with 59 percent (up from 52 percent seven years earlier) saying they “feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being at least once a week.”<sup>30</sup>

In October 2019, Pew released an update on its 2007 and 2014 “Religious Landscape” studies. The update was entitled “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace.”<sup>31</sup> Based on a telephone survey conducted in July 2019, the report indicated that 65 percent of U.S. adults identified as “Christian” (down from about 75 percent in 2009), while 26 percent identified as “religiously unaffiliated” (up from the 23 percent in 2014). The “religiously unaffiliated” percentage was aggregated by summing self-identified “atheists” (4 percent, up from 2 percent in 2009), agnostics (5 percent, up from 3 percent in 2009), and people who “describe their religion as ‘nothing in particular’ ” (17 percent, up from 13 percent in 2009).

As it did in its 2015 reports, in its October 2019 update, Pew used “none” as a short-hand term for a religiously unaffiliated person. Not even every self-identified “atheist,” however, is reliably a “none.” Indeed, a December 2019 Pew post noted that “about one-in-five self-described atheists say they do believe in some kind of higher power,” and 31 percent say “they often feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, when it comes to Christian or other religious beliefs and tenets, an agnostic is presumptively...agnostic; and, people who “describe their religion as ‘nothing in particular’ ” are not thereby describing their religion as “nothing” or “none.”

Indeed, in the 2014 Pew “landscape” survey, most “nones” believed in God (61 percent), 20 percent prayed daily, and 9 percent attended worship services at least monthly; and, a 2017 Pew survey found that about 3 in ten 10 of the 80 percent of all people who answer “yes” when asked “Do you believe in God?,” like about half of the 20 percent who answer “no,” do not believe in “God as described in the Bible,” but do believe in a “higher power/spiritual force.”<sup>33</sup>

But make no mistake: today, religion in general, Christian religion in particular, and traditional religious beliefs and practices are less pervasive, and have less influence over both beliefs and behaviors, than they did a quarter-century ago. That trend has accelerated over the last decade, and not only among the young, the college-educated, and the politically progressive.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Pew Research Center, *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace: An Update on America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, October 17, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Lipka, “10 Facts about Atheists,” Pew Research Center, FACTANK: News in the Numbers, December 6, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> David O’Reilly, “When You Say You Believe in God, What Do You Mean?,” *Trust*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Fall 2018, p. 13.

In 2019, 58 percent of Americans agreed that “compared to 20 years ago, religion has a less important role in our country.”<sup>34</sup> I concur.

Still, just as an individual who is unaffiliated with a political party should not be coded as an ideologically disengaged political “none,” an individual who is unaffiliated with a religious organization should not be coded as a spiritually disengaged religious “none.” Campaigning and contributing money to a party is a politically salient behavior, just as church-going and contributing money to a congregation is a religiously salient behavior. In each case, however, there are myriad other behaviors that are no less salient but that require neither party nor church.

Over the last several decades, we have learned lots about political independents, including how hard it can be to quantify, categorize, and characterize them. For instance, in February 2020, in the 31 states that required voters to register by party, about 29 percent of those registered to vote were registered as Republicans, about 29 percent were registered as independents, and about 42 percent were registered as Democrats.<sup>35</sup> Also in February 2020, a Gallup survey asked voting-age adults in all 50 states whether “you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat or an independent”: 33 percent identified as Republicans, 39 percent identified as independents, and 26 percent identified as Democrats.<sup>36</sup> Other Gallup surveys indicate that, overall in 2020, 29 percent of Americans identified as Republicans and 14 percent identified as Republican-leaning independents; 30 percent identified as Democrats and 18 percent as Democrat-leaning independents; and 7 percent identified as independents without expressing any partisan leaning.<sup>37</sup>

By comparison, we have less (and less fine-grained) data about what I would prefer to call “religious independents” than we do about political independents, and hence more reason to remain circumspect about how best to quantify, categorize, and characterize them. But we already know enough not to think about religiously unaffiliated individuals as anything like a vast, rapidly growing, monolithic, and irreligious army of “nones.” I doubt that more religious independents will give rise to ever deeper political or ideological polarization; and, I am hopeful that more religious independents will not result in fewer faith-based programs, but rather in more variety in how they define missions, mobilize volunteers, find funding, and forge partnerships.

### **Sister Mary, Meet Uncle Ben**

Sister Mary Scullion is a nun, not a “none.” People in Philly half-joke that when Pope Francis visited in 2015, he came in the hope of getting an audience with Sister Mary. But Sister’s world-class Project Home is “faith-based” only by association with its co-founder’s

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<sup>34</sup> David O’Reilly, “How People View Religion’s Role: A 27-Country Survey,” *Trust*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Summer 2019, p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> Aaron Blake, “For the First Time, there are fewer registered Republicans than independents,” *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2020, reporting data from Ballot Access News, which tracks registrations in the 31 states that require voters to register by party.

<sup>36</sup> Gallup: <http://news.gallup.com/poli/15370/party-affiliation.aspx>, tracking answers to that question from January 2004 through mid-March 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, “Party ID Average for 2020 Winds Up Similar to Prior Years,” Gallup News: Politics, January 8, 2021, reporting survey results on U.S. party identification, 1988 to 2021.

religious pedigree, not by its formal-legal nonprofit charter. (Learn more about Project Home and the amazing Sister Mary,<sup>38</sup> and then try situating the organization in that Sider-Unruh typology—fun for the whole religious or quasi-religious or secular family!)

The title to Sister Mary's essay says it all: faith heals, but faith can also hurt.<sup>39</sup> In 2000, my dear friend E.J. Dionne and I co-edited a volume published by the Brookings Institution, *What's God Got to do with the American Experiment?* In our introduction, we wrote:

*(Religious faith) can create community, and it can divide communities. It can lead to searing self-criticism, and it can promote a pompous self-satisfaction. It can encourage dissent and conformity, generosity and narrow-mindedness...Its very best and very worst forms can be inward-looking. Religion's finest hours have been times when intense belief led to social transformation, yet some of its darkest days have entailed the translation of intense belief into the ruthless imposition of orthodoxy.*<sup>40</sup>

James Madison, the U.S. Constitution's chief architect, and the First Amendment's chief negotiator, beat us all to this punch. On the one hand, Madison agreed with his main College of New Jersey (a.k.a., Princeton) mentor, Reverend John Witherspoon, that religion (or at least New Light Scot Presbyterianism) was a very good thing; but, on the other hand, he agreed with his most revered friend, Thomas Jefferson, that religion can be both a civic toxin and a civic tonic. Thus it is that, in *Federalist Paper* No. 10, Madison lists "a zeal for different opinions concerning religion" first when discoursing on the causes of "factions" that are "adverse to the rights of other citizens" and contrary to "the permanent and aggregate interests of the community" (a.k.a., the public interest or the common good).

Unfortunately, a few too many fans of faith-based initiatives have been, and continue to be, unwilling to admit that religion, while it may be demonstrably, on net, a significant civic, social, and economic good (I so profess), is almost never and nowhere an unalloyed good. It was easier (if more tedious and boring) arguing religion's double-edged sword quality when, for example, writing an academic article for the *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* in 2009,<sup>41</sup> than it was when speaking as a senior White House official and the first "faith czar" in 2001; but, then as now, that was the complicated truth, at least as I could discern it.

By the same token, whether one is a faith-based fan or foe, it is critical to understand "religious freedom" as involving an individual choosing to be religious *or not to be religious*, to choose this religion or that one, or to switch religions, all without needing to fear government-

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<sup>38</sup> Project Home: <https://projecthome.org>

<sup>39</sup> Mary Scullion, "Faith That Hurts and Faith That Heals," in Daniel J.M. Cheely, ed., *Faith-Based Initiative at 25 Years: A Common Ground for Common Good Conversation* (Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, Spring 2021), chapter 8.

<sup>40</sup> E.J. Dionne and John J. Dilulio, Jr., *What's God Got to do with the American Experiment?* (Brookings Institution Press, 2000), introduction.

<sup>41</sup> John J. Dilulio, Jr. "More Religion, Less Crime?: Science, Felonies, and the Three Faith Factors," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, Vol. 5, 2009, pp. 115-133

authorized interference or...*worse*. This all-American understanding of religious freedom is beautifully illustrated in Barry Fireman's 2009 book, *From the Broken Windows*.

Therein, Fireman recounts how his elder Jewish family members survived the Russian Revolution, fled pogroms from 1907 to 1922, and ended up in America—Camden, New Jersey, to be specific. Fireman's grandfather, Eliahu, was an orthodox Jew. His father, Eliahu's adult son, Boroch, was a secular Jew. Fireman writes of their first day in America:

*They awoke...and they began learning what it was like to live in the United States. Eliahu could practice his religion without fear, and Boruch was finally free of it.*<sup>42</sup>

Boroch, by the way, became known to me as "Great Uncle Ben," courtesy of a Jewish girl I met in 1974 who has been stuck with me ever since. Only in faith-based America.

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<sup>42</sup> Barry Fireman, *From the Broken Windows: A Story of Survival* (Barry Fireman, 2009), p. 169.