

Faith That Hurts and Faith That Heals

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*A response to Dr. Stanley Carlson-Thies' essay "The Biden Partnerships Plan Is Faith-Based Initiative 5.0." Written for Program for Research on Religion & Urban Civil Society, University of Pennsylvania
April 28, 2021*

Every Tuesday morning, residents, staff, volunteers, and friends gather in the community room of our permanent supportive housing residence for persons who once lived on the streets. It is our weekly "inspirational meeting," and a core feature is a personal story from one of our community members. While every story is unique, there are common threads: harrowing struggles to survive, deep wounds of abuse and marginalization, almost unfathomable obstacles to overcome – and yet, the miracles of grace and perseverance, the power of recovery, and the discovery of a healing community. Not infrequently, thanks are given to God, and the testimonies can turn into powerful messages of hope and grace.

Project HOME is not a religious organization. But we know that spirituality – in many forms – is an integral part of our work. It may be the financial support of religious organizations, from a Catholic women's religious order to a coalition of African American churches to a Jewish human services organization to the Muslim community, without which we would not be able to provide the housing and services that enable the stories of transformation we hear each Tuesday. Or the deeply-rooted spirituality of recovery, in which dependence on a Higher Power is the taproot of healing and growth. Or particular religious motivations of our community members, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, that inspire them to give so deeply of themselves to the mission that it is more than just a job.

We are not, by definition, a "faith-based organization." Yet our mission statement asserts that "the work of Project HOME is rooted in our strong spiritual conviction of the dignity of each person." The words "spiritual conviction" have rankled some persons over the years, especially those who are rooted in a paradigm of nonprofit professionalism that assumes anything religious is inappropriate. A suspicion of religion in human services work is certainly understandable, given the dubious track record of many churches and faith-based groups whose operative theologies equate poverty, addiction, or even a person's sexual orientation with sin, and whose services can have a deeply judgmental and dehumanizing character. We are familiar with the image of persons living with poverty and hunger forced to sit through long services – featuring heavy doses of calls to repentance – before receiving a meal.

Certainly, we want religious persons and groups to care for individuals and families trapped in poverty, struggling with hunger, lacking healthcare, beaten down by addiction or mental illness, or stigmatized because of experiences of incarceration. But if such care carries with it a sense of moral superiority, a subtle “blame-the-victim” mentality, it can function to maintain cultural codes and stigmas, almost like ancient codes of “clean” and “unclean.” In the worst cases, charity can be the sheep’s clothing for the wolf of judgmental, dehumanizing, and discriminatory attitudes. Even for many religious persons who may see themselves as well-meaning, acts of service can be a vehicle of maintaining a social hierarchy of false values, with some at the top and the “less fortunate” on the bottom.

Religion can be as positive force for good, but it can also be a destructive force on persons and on society as a whole – a reality we are increasingly witnessing as highly politicized religion is fueling deep and dangerous polarization in the United States.

The older (and current) critics of faith-based human services were mostly concerned about violations of constitutional safeguards around the role of religion in the public sphere. As Dr. Carlson-Thies recounts, a key question in the development of government support for faith-based initiatives has been the careful balance between giving more space for partnerships with faith-based nonprofits while both protecting religious freedoms and navigating those constitutional safeguards.

It is appropriate, in our democratic society, to put legal limits on such religious activities as proselytizing or giving preference to one religion over another. But the issue is not only one of public policy and legality; it is also one of theology. When we talk about faith-based or religiously grounded programs, there is no single or simple definition of faith, religion, or even spirituality.

The development of the faith-based initiatives policies has been welcome and positive. Government can play a valuable role in opening up venues for community-based, religiously grounded ministries and programs to bring their resources and care to bear on pressuring human needs and social crises. And government can set appropriate limits and guidelines to ensure that religious and faith-based service programs operate appropriately in a democratic and pluralistic society. But an equally urgent matter is one that falls outside the government’s purview: How do we avoid old toxic theologies that do more harm than good?

It is not the role of government to police theologies and religious teachings. But people of faith and conscience on the ground who benefit from the investment of public resources must find ways to translate their theological beliefs and religious practices to enhance the common good and to serve all people. In practice, this means understanding that faith and spirituality are matters not simply of specific doctrines, but of values and vision that are at the heart of all great religions: the sacredness and inherent dignity of each person, the spark of the divine that is the defining truth of our shared humanity, the fostering of Beloved Community that defies social and moral hierarchies that would separate us.

Over the years, we have seen profoundly hopeful developments. Most churches and faith-based nonprofits have moved away from dehumanizing practices and the destructive theologies. They have come to a deeper awareness of social and systemic realities of poverty; they understand that addiction is a health crisis, not a moral one. Many religious communities have grown into theologies that, instead of focusing on the personal “sins” of persons needing help, are more likely to see the social sins of poverty, racism, mass incarceration, economic disinvestment and inequities.

Another hopeful development: We come to realize that authentic spirituality is not “over and above” but “with.” In faith-based practice, the formula of “us taking care of them” gives way to a deeper awareness that we are engaging in a common liberation. The real work of mercy, compassion, and justice – whether understood in specifically religious language or not – means bringing people from all walks of life and all parts of society together in a common mission that addresses specific social issues such as poverty, racism or homelessness to transform us and our society. As we say at Project HOME, “None of us are home until all of us are home.”

Even more hope: Ministries of service bring different religious communities together in common ground –which is especially crucial at a time when religion is so often a weapon of division. Distilling our various theologies down to the common core of compassion, mercy, and justice, we have witnessed tremendous interfaith efforts toward social healing that acknowledges and celebrates the unique religious beliefs and traditions of each faith while finding the miracle and power of coming together to enact the divine mission of love. As we work together to heal hurting members of our community, we are at the same time healing the divisions between our traditions.

We welcome the role of government in creating the space for these efforts to happen. We see the tremendous impact when the government (at all levels) enters into concrete and strategic partnerships with nonprofits, the private sector, and the religious communities. Done with wisdom and vision, the gifts of the religious traditions are able to serve our pluralistic democracy. And we learn that, underlying our many forms of religious and non-religious expression, a deeper truth unites us, calling us to the truth of who we are as persons and empowering us to build a truly just, inclusive and welcoming society.