RELIGION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Houses of worship build and sustain more social capital – and social capital of more varied forms – than any other type of institution in America. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship provide a vibrant institutional base for civic good works and a training ground for civic entrepreneurs. Roughly speaking, nearly half of America's stock of social capital is religious or religiously affiliated, whether measured by association memberships, philanthropy, or volunteering. Houses of worship run a variety of programs for members, from self-help groups to job training courses to singles' clubs. Houses of worship also spend $15- to $20-billion each year on social services, such as food and housing for the poor and elderly. Regular religious services attenders meet many more people weekly than non-worshipers, making religious institutions a prime forum for informal social capital building.

At the same time, religious faith provides a moral foundation for civic regeneration. Faith gives meaning to community service and good will, forging a spiritual connection between individual impulses and great public issues. That is, religion helps people to internalize an orientation to the public good. Because faith has such power to transform lives, faith-based programs can enjoy success where secular programs have failed.[*]

For all that faith organizations contribute to community life, organized religion is – and always has been – controversial, especially when it spills out from behind the church doors into the public sphere. Religion can heal divisions, to be sure, but it can also exacerbate them. Religious exhortations can reduce tensions, but also increase them. The challenge is to find ways for religious leaders and institutions to fit safely and comfortably into a society made up of a virtual alphabet soup of traditions, from Atheists, Baptists, and Catholics, all the way to Salvationists, Unitarians, and Zen Buddhists.

In this chapter, we have two overarching messages. To religious institutions, we urge rededication to the project of reaching across congregations, denominations, and religions to promote a larger sense of community – that is, to rebuilding our stock of bridging social capital. If houses of worship explicitly emphasize social capital as much as they do spirituality, they will further both missions. To secular leaders, we urge you to suspend suspicion of faith-based organizations and to think creatively about ways to work with religious leaders and other people of faith in projects of civic renewal. We know from our own heated discussions that grappling with the role of religion in public life is not easy. But these discussions need to take place, and each of us – whether religious or not – needs to reexamine how faith organizations do and can create a more civil, social-capital-rich community.

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[*] *We use the term "faith based" to describe programs and organizations oriented toward a religious belief in a higher power. We acknowledge that non-religious organizations also may be based on faith (for example, in humanity or the sacred nature of life).*

Trends in Religious Social Capital

America has long been recognized for the breadth and depth of its religious tradition. The vast majority of us believe in God, and 30-40% of us report attending religious services weekly. This is in large part because America, which lacks a state religion, has provided fertile ground for the blossoming of a great many new faiths and offshoots of existing ones. One scholar notes that America is "the most religiously fecund country" in the world.[1]

However, at the turn of the millennium, America finds itself at a spiritual crossroads. Participation in formal religious activities and organizations has been eroding for nearly 40 years. Since peaking in the late 1950s, the fraction of Americans attending religious services weekly has declined by roughly 25 percent.[2] Most of the decline occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s, and it may have reflected a "market correction" after an unusual post-War religious boom. But it is important to note that, even after any purported correction, religious attendance continued in a slow slide throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, with at least 10 percentage points of the roughly 25-point decline in religious attendance occurring during those decades. Recently, evangelical churches have begun to gain members, but these gains do not compensate for the overall decline in churchgoing. Moreover, religious philanthropy in real dollars has declined steadily since 1969.[3]

The Cultural Ascendance of Faith

In spite of the decline in traditional religious attendance – or maybe even related to it – religion and spirituality have begun to infuse our politics, our media, and our everyday discourse in a way not seen in recent generations.

In politics, the Christian Coalition enjoyed enormous success in setting the agenda for local and national Republican party committees in the 1980s and early 1990s. The 2000 Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates spent days fielding questions about how their personal religious faith affected their lives and their approach to governing. And some of the most widely debated issues of the day have a religious cast – prayer in public schools, government vouchers for parochial schools, and abortion, to name a few.

Policy makers have begun to address openly the central role of religious institutions and religious faith in healing social ills. Indeed, the 1996 welfare reform legislation contained an explicit "charitable choice" provision to give faith-based charities equal access to government funds to support programs that help families on welfare become self-sufficient. In states such as Wisconsin, lawmakers allow students to use taxpayer-financed "vouchers" to attend parochial schools instead of public schools. In Indianapolis, former Mayor Stephen Goldsmith started the highly successful and much-studied Front Porch Alliance, in which the city government serves as a "civic switchboard" connecting houses of worship to businesses, public agencies and community groups. Through the Alliance, the city provides small grants to houses of worship that are trying to solve social problems and helps them to cut through bureaucracy to get things done, such as buying an abandoned lot to build a playground.[4]

Even the media are beginning to reflect the nation's concern with its spiritual malaise. There are an estimated 2,500 television and radio evangelists in the United States, and they raise over $3 billion annually.[5] In addition, religion has made inroads on the major networks, whose traditional fare has tended toward soaps and sitcoms. In a move that would have been unheard-of even a decade before, CBS launched "Touched by an Angel," a prime-time drama that revolves around the love of God and the redemptive power of his messengers. The program ranks consistently high in the Nielsen ratings, and its viewers seem to be unusually community-minded.

Meantime, religion and "values" weigh heavy on the minds of the American public. In the late 1990s, there was a strong, steady, and unprecedented rise among Americans who cited the "breakdown of family values" or decline in morality as the nation's most pressing problem. In virtually every poll, more people cited spiritual ills as a top problem than cited drug abuse, or the health care system, or broken schools, or poverty.[6]

All this suggests that, as formal religious participation declines, Americans seem to be searching for a way to heal spiritual rifts within themselves and within their society. Many houses of worship hope to respond to this spiritual yearning by sponsoring innovative programs to attract the relatively unchurched post-Boomer generations and to lure middle-aged and older lapsed Americans back into the fold. The new "megachurches," which blend spirituality, entertainment, and services for thousands of parishioners, and use corporate strategies to find these new "customers," are a prominent manifestation of such efforts.

As Americans and their religious institutions seek to reconcile after decades of growing alienation, the time is ripe to translate this increasing interest in spirituality into complementary work for community renewal.

Principles of Building Faith-Based Social Capital

Any effort to realize the potential of religious contributions to civic life must be guided by both principles and pragmatism. As pragmatists, we recognize that religion is both important and contentious in America. A nation founded by pilgrims seeking to escape religious tyranny, the United States has a constitutionally enshrined separation between church and state. After the rights-based social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and amid the growing ethnic and religious diversity that continues today, many Americans have come to believe that freedom of religion also means freedom from religion. While there is no evidence that atheism is on the rise, skepticism or hostility toward religion seems to be more openly expressed now compared to 50 years ago. The historical abuses and misuses of religious faith – that is, the harmful consequences of religious social capital – have made many Americans understandably concerned about mixing private faith and public life. Taken to an extreme, religious impulses can be self-righteous, divisive, and even violent.

Hence, the principles that guide religious involvement in civic renewal must recognize that such efforts hold both potential and peril. The challenge is to nurture religious work grounded in love, not hate, and in unity, not division. We endorse three such principles.

Principle 1: Strengthen Congregations as Civic Institutions. Americans (and the Saguaro members ourselves) are deeply divided over what role, if any, religion should play in public life. This is a controversial issue with many facets, and it will not be resolved soon, if ever. We strongly support the separation of church and state. Contrary to our collective memories, the doctrine of separation of church and state enshrines *two* beliefs: a prohibition on the governmental establishment of religion *and* the protection of religious expression from government interference. We do not advocate that public policy be based on explicitly religious tenets, nor do we favor relaxing the present restrictions on the role of religious institutions in politics.

At the same time, we recognize that houses of worship are vitally important community organizations that have played a central role in many of the great social and political transformations in history – from abolitionism and temperance in the 19th century to the civil-rights and human-rights movements of the 20th century. For many ethnic groups, houses of worship organize civic life: from voters mobilized by African-American churches to sporting leagues organized by Asian-American churches. In varying degrees, houses of worship teach civically relevant values, including compassion, forgiveness, fairness, altruism, and respect for the world beyond oneself. And, of course, houses of worship are vibrant voluntary associations that teach people how to organize events, speak in public, and work together toward common ends – important civic skills on the wane in America.

Secular leaders – whether from government, the academy, organized philanthropy, or the non-profit world – must challenge their assumption that religious organizations are primarily preoccupied with "other worldly" concerns and recognize how deeply these organizations are embedded in the civic life of congregants and their communities. This important civic role should be nurtured and broadened.

Principle 2: Encourage Religious Collaboration to Mediate the Culture War. Commentators on the right have argued that America faces a "culture war" between modernists, who favor individualistic, rights-oriented, and tolerant conceptions of the good society, and traditionalists, who believe the "new morality" has loosed America from its ethical moorings. Some recent research[7] challenges whether the depth and breadth of the culture war are as great as was asserted. But there is no question that, more than any time in the past century, Americans are deeply divided over cultural values. The traditional class-based debates over economic regulation and the welfare state have given way to emotionally charged debates over abortion, homosexuality, affirmative action, gun control, and God – what social scientists refer to (perhaps optimistically) as "post-materialist politics."[8] These debates are often shrill and unyielding, with each side vilifying the other and no obvious "moderate middle" to broker civility or compromise.

Many of the most divisive political issues have an explicitly religious dimension.[9] In some cases, this is because adherents of a particular faith see scriptural exhortations for their beliefs – about abortion, say, or homosexuality. In other cases, it is because faith communities overlap with value communities – for example, racism is a particular threat to African Americans (many of whom worship in historically black churches), and gun control is a particular concern for those who worship in the conservative congregations of the South.

Given that religion is entangled with many of the public issues of the day, is there a role for religious institutions to play in helping Americans to overcome the incivility, distrust, animosity, and sometimes even violence that these issues have engendered? Can religious institutions help Americans find ways of working through these problems with mutual respect and good will? We believe that they can.

Religious leaders have always been at the forefront of drives for local and national reconciliation. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. brought together an inter-race, inter-faith movement to pursue the promise of a just society, a society where "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood."[10] In many cities, including Boston, inner-city congregations have taken the lead in defusing tensions between rival gangs and, in the process, have helped greatly to reduce the rate of youth homicide. Across the country, religious leaders have been integral in bringing communities together in the aftermath of hate crimes. In 1993, for example, Billings, Montana, congregations helped to lead a community response to skinheads' vandalism of Jewish homes and African-American churches during the winter holidays. In solidarity with the victims, white congregants attended services at black churches, and Christian churches displayed menorahs during Hanukkah. Meanwhile, Jewish groups have led the charge for anti-hate-crimes laws at the state and national levels.

Bridge-building efforts need not take the form of ongoing educational or legislative programs. They might, instead, consist of occasional spiritually grounded rituals to bring communities together on days of special meaning, such as Martin Luther King's birthday or the anniversary of a particularly devastating natural disaster. Religious leaders are ideally suited to lead communities in non-sectarian rituals of celebration and healing.

Religious leaders can be successful bridge-builders because they have precisely the right set of resources. For one, they command community respect, and therefore speak with moral authority. Second, by dint of their profession, they counsel, exhort, and persuade audiences totaling tens of millions of people each week. Further, unlike other leaders, religious figures draw inspiration from scriptures that almost universally emphasize peace, fellowship, and altruism; their language is the language of social capital. Because several of us are ministers, we do not presume to suggest how pastors, rabbis, and other clergy members should communicate with their own congregations. However, we do recognize the unique role that religious leaders, including those of us in the Saguaro Seminar, can play in healing broken communities, in addition to broken souls.

Principle 3: Encourage Inter-Faith Collaboration on Social Issues. Houses of worship have always been houses of service, and religious workers have always been social workers. Since the earliest decades of the Republic, congregations and religious charities have run schools, orphanages, old-age homes, and community centers. These activities continue today, albeit at a reduced level. In any given city or town in the United States, one likely finds religious institutions running food and shelter programs for the homeless, self-help programs for the addicted, fellowship programs for new immigrants, classes for welfare recipients, housing developments for the working poor, social activities for singles, and exercise programs for the out-of-shape.

While taken individually these programs serve a valuable purpose, houses of worship have sometimes been more effective when they have worked together.[11] Although institutional jealousies and cultural differences among faiths have been known to get in the way, houses of worship in many places have been able to circumvent such difficulties to spectacular ends. In New York, for example, two consortia of churches, using cut-rate loans from government and private sources, built nearly 3,000 units of "Nehemiah" housing for the working poor, and in the process began the rejuvenation of blighted sections of the Bronx and Brooklyn. More recently, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders in Minnesota have mounted diverse political and educational efforts to reduce gun violence, justifying their involvement with the spiritual adage that "all life is sacred."

Religious coalitions are national, as well. Asserting the "fundamental dignity of each human life," Call to Renewal, a network of churches and faith-based organizations, has launched a major initiative to reduce poverty and overcome racism by strengthening existing church-based efforts and promoting new networks of cooperation. We endorse such collaborative efforts, and urge that government agencies, foundations, businesses, and individuals take a closer look at the feasibility of supporting faith-based collaborations locally.

Recommendations for Building Social Capital Through Faith-Based Groups

In part because of our different perspectives on organized religion, and in part because America itself is divided on the issue, Saguaro members are reluctant to issue a blueprint for using faith to build social capital. However, we discussed several ideas that are emblematic of the ways that social capitalists could employ faith-based institutions, and the lessons they offer, to restore an ethic of reciprocity, trust, and service in America.

Recommendation 1: Increase "Secular" Funds for Faith-Based Organizations. We encourage private foundations and corporations to abandon their traditionally arms-length relationship with faith-based organizations. Organized philanthropy can play a pivotal role both in brokering partnerships between sectarian and secular organizations and in giving faith communities new sources of financial support.

On the first point, we support efforts by foundations, such as the Pew Charitable Trusts, to shore up faith-based civic engagement and inspire national recognition of the role of faith communities in democratic renewal. Laying the intellectual groundwork for its "Religion and the Public Square" program, Pew has observed that growing numbers of social movements "are of explicitly religious inspiration – whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or Muslim – and are playing an increasingly significant role in mobilizing citizens for political action and in shaping the broader public debate." These movements "call into question the assumption that faith commitments are, and should remain, strictly private, safely removed from the public square."[12] At the same time, the movement of religion into the public square obliges Americans to ensure that democratic pluralism can still thrive as religious differences are pushed to the fore.

Organized philanthropy also has a vital role to play in strengthening the financial, physical and volunteer resources of churches that minister to the community. One stumbling block is that big foundations often have evaluation, financial reporting, and other requirements that are difficult for

small, non-professional congregations and religious groups to meet. On this point, the evangelical scholar Ronald J. Sider recommends creating "intermediary agencies" to channel contributions to religious entities.[13] These agencies, which could be inter-denominational or intra-denominational, regional or local, would submit proposals to government or private grant makers and then sub-contract with specific congregations providing services. The agencies would bridge the communication gap between religious groups and secular grant makers, and provide technical assistance to congregations on everything from accounting to evaluation.

With respect to government funding of religious organizations, the Saguaro participants, like the rest of Americans, are strongly divided. On the one hand, the "charitable choice" provision of the welfare-reform law holds promise for building social capital and improving the lives of poor women, and faith-based partnerships such as Indianapolis's Front Porch Alliance have shown impressive results in rebuilding community. In addition, recent research suggests that school voucher programs may increase social capital between schools and parents. However, some of us are concerned about the intermingling of government funds and religious programming, no matter how many safeguards are in place to preserve the constitutional separation of church and state. We cautiously endorse charitable choice and partnerships between cities and faith-based organizations, so long as there are strict safeguards to prevent government-subsidized proselytizing to service recipients who do not wish to participate and to protect the autonomy of houses of worship. Because we are deeply divided on the wisdom of school voucher programs, we remain agnostic on this issue.

Recommendation 2: Foster Collaboration Between Faith Communities and Secular Service & Advocacy Groups. Faith communities have many resources to contribute to civic causes. These include both moral resources, such as values that inspire action, and organizational resources, such as denominational funds and volunteers from local houses of worship. Bringing secular activists together with religious organizations would follow our principle of building "bridging" social capital across lines of belief and greatly expand movements for social betterment.

For example, in 1993, leaders from four faith traditions (Catholic, Church of Christ, Jewish, and Evangelical) founded the National Religious Partnership on the Environment after prominent scientists called on faith communities to take on conservation as a moral obligation. Since then, the Partnership has helped local congregations to link church-based volunteers to local environmental groups, provided guidance on environmental sermons, and enlisted religious leaders to lobby for stronger environmental laws.[14] On a local level, working through the Citizen Leaders program of Imagine Chicago, religious congregations have nominated especially far-sighted parishioners to help design projects to strengthen their congregation and community. One of the projects, a "family health night" held at a church in the Englewood section of Chicago, has evolved into a larger social-improvement program for the entire neighborhood. The National Religious Partnership on the Environment and the Citizen Leaders program are two models for collaboration between faith communities and secular organizations that can be applied to a broader range of issues and geographic areas.

Recommendation 3: Promote Values in Secular Organizations. One Saguaro participant noted that religious group membership is a "code for values." Membership in faith groups is attractive because it gives members a moral compass and signals to others a commitment to shared values.

The Saguaro members suggested that non-faith-based groups could do more to provide members with a moral compass and engender a "values ethos" among them. We would like to see non-faith groups stop shying away from an explicit commitment to values. Such a commitment creates stronger bonds of trust and reciprocity.

Recommendation 4: Put More Than Money in the Collection Plate. In Boston, some area synagogues are substituting service for dues: Members can pay off their financial obligation with hours of volunteer service. One Saguaro participant offered an intriguing and expanded parallel. Congregations should encourage their members to put "social capital promises for the congregation and for the broader community" in the collection plate in addition to, or instead of, donations. For example, one member might pledge to read to a neighboring blind person; another might commit to watching a parishioner's children when she went to apply for a job. Translating religious reciprocity into social service follows our principle of "Recycling" social capital, as well as our principle of building social capital "C2C." As one Saguaro participant noted, "Time and talent precede treasure in a tithe."

Concluding Thoughts

Beyond endorsing the broad principles or strategies above, we are reluctant to offer specific recommendations to houses of worship and their leaders about how to build social capital. As a religiously diverse group, we would not pretend to advise any religious organization about how to carry out its particular spiritual mission. Our major conclusion is that religious institutions have the capacity to make the most of their unique role, and that the American public ought to honor and support that role within the bounds of the Free Exercise and Non-Establishment Clauses of the Constitution. We are persuaded by surveys and anecdotal evidence that, in an age of unbridled prosperity, many Americans feel a spiritual void and a cynicism about their fellow citizens. We believe that religious organizations are naturally suited to uplifting our national spirit.

NOTES:

[1] Seymour Martin Lipset, "Comment on Luckmann," in *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu and James S. Coleman (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 185-188, quotation at 187.

[2] This is from an average of five longitudinal surveys of religious attendance over the last three decades in Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). The five data sources were Gallup Organization polls, National Election Studies, Roper Social and Political Trends surveys, the General Social Survey, and DDB Needham Life Style surveys.

[3] Ronald Sider, *Just Generosity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999).

[4] David Holmstrom, "Front Porch Alliance Fosters Church-City Cooperation," *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 May 1998.

[5] Patrice Apodaca, "Southland: Television's Bible Belt," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 1998. In 1996 there were 1,573 stations broadcasting religious shows ("Business Digest," *New York Times*, 12 February 1996). Religious programming reached more than 20 million Americans (Caryle Murphy, "They're Finding God on the Radio Dial; Faithful Listeners Give Religious Stations Bigger Share of Airwaves," *Washington Post*, 27 May 1997).

[6] See Gallup polls in December 1997, April 1998, September 1998, January 1999, and May 1999 (summarized at http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/Indmip.asp).

[7] See, for example, Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All* (New York: Viking, 1998).

[8] See, for example, Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[9] All political judgments, of course, are rooted in some normative framework that is finally grounded in some philosophical/religious worldview, but this "religious" dimension of all political discourse is often not explicit.

[10] From Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered August 28, 1963, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.

[11] We need further research and analysis to discover what types of programs are most effectively done through individual congregations or smaller networks that share common religious commitments and what things are more effectively accomplished through inter-denominational and inter-faith coalitions.

[12] Luis E. Lugo, "Religion and the Public Square: Religious Grantmaking at The Pew Charitable Trusts," at http://www.pewtrusts.org/Frame.cfm?Framesource=Programs/Programs.cfm

[13] See Ronald Sider, "Faith-Based Organizations and Community Foundations: Should They Develop a Closer Partnership?" Presentation to Annual Meeting of Larger Community Foundations, 28 January 2000.

[14] The coalition consisted of the Evangelical Environmental Network, the Coalition on the Environment & Jewish Life, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and the United States Catholic Conference (more information is available at: www.nrpe.org).