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Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society (Book Review)

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“device”). The inherent character of these technological artifacts determines a relationship between the listener, the player, and the artifact, a relationship that in the end results in distinctly different human experiences, one demanding, the other disposable. The importance of this distinction for Borgmann is that “material culture in the advanced industrial democracies spans a spectrum from commanding to disposable reality. The former reality calls forth a life of engagement that is oriented within the physical and social world. The latter induces a life of distraction that is isolated from the environment and other people” (33). This distinction leads me to believe that we often ask the wrong questions. Instead of asking whether to do or not do technology, we should be asking questions regarding the nature of our technological artifacts. Do they engage or disengage our normative relationships between each other and the world around us?

I appreciated much of Borgmann’s analysis, but I felt that several of his many distinctions begged for a more thorough treatment. I expect readers will share a common experience. I found myself initially experiencing agreement followed by a question of “How does this distinction serve us?” Borgmann’s answers to such questions in the book will likely leave the reader unsatisfied. Perhaps that is not all bad. A book that makes us look at our world from a different Christian angle may be just what we need. It drives us to answer the hanging questions for ourselves.

I found it ironic that in a book that is saturated with distinction and definition, the only thing that the author fails to define clearly is technology itself. Is technology an activity? Is technology an entity? Is technology a concept? The author seems content to work with a vague development of this main character in his book,

assuming that people know from experience what technology is. I am not sure that this is a good assumption.

If any one section from this book jumped out and grabbed me, it was Borgmann’s essay entitled “Contingency and Grace.” It probably has something to do with my growing up a Lutheran, but I still suffer from a chronic grace addiction. So when Borgmann threw out a hypothesis as to why grace seems to be a rather rare experience in our technological world, he had my attention. He puts it this way: “Many of us share the intuition that contemporary life is uniquely inhospitable to Christianity. What makes this unreceptive atmosphere unique is the general lack of apparent opposition. Our culture seems indifferent to the real message of Christianity and at the same time is eroding the ground that Christianity needs to prosper” (65). The fertile soil that is required for Christianity to prosper is a “receptivity to grace.” And as Borgmann notes, “Grace is always undeserved and often unforethinkable, and a culture of transparency and control systematically reduces, if it does not occlude, the precinct of grace...The kind of approach to reality that aims at transparency and control is but another definition of modern technology” (65).

While I personally found the first four of the eight essays in this book more valuable and interesting than the last four, I think the book deserves a reading by Christians wrestling with how to respond to technological change. It is not an easy read, but it is a book that provides the reader a view of technology from a Christian vantage point. I would hope that what we see from this perspective will inspire us to continually reform our technological decisions. Maybe we should start by asking of our technology, does it fortify or erode our receptivity to grace?

Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society by Robert Wuthnow (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 354 pages. Reviewed by Jim Vanderwoerd, Associate Professor of Social Work, Dordt College.

My first social services job in the early 1980s was as a child and youth counselor in a group home for pre-adolescents with behavioral and emotional difficulties. I was given responsibility for the FLARE program—Family Life and Religious Education. You might guess from this description that I was working not for a public or government agency but, rather, for a Christian (Catholic) social services organization. As the FLARE coordinator, I took the children to church services on my weekend shifts, enrolled them in youth programs with a local congregation, and planned celebrations of Christian holidays at the home. Since this agency received most of its funding from government contracts and grants, how could I, and the agency, get away with such explicit religious programming? That’s a good question; it didn’t

occur to me then, but I’ve thought a lot about it since.

The debate about whether religious social service organizations should be publicly funded, and if so, whether such funding should come with strings attached that limit explicit religious practices, has been going on at least since 1996 in the U.S., when President Clinton “ended welfare as we know it” by signing into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Included in this legislation, known as welfare reform, was a section referred to as “Charitable Choice,” which removed restrictions for religious organizations, including churches, from receiving government funding to provide welfare programs. Fueling this debate are strong opinions for and against increased funding partnerships between government and

religious organizations. Unfortunately, few of these opinions are informed by a good grasp of the complexity of the issues. Robert Wuthnow's book, fortunately, is an exception. *Saving America?* is a welcome contribution because of its balanced and thorough assessment of the best available information about the types of faith-based organizations, what kinds of programs they run, where they get their resources, how effective they are and to whom, and how they're perceived and supported by various constituencies.

Wuthnow's account is primarily that of a social scientist. He does not approach the topic with a clearly identified strong position for or against faith-based organizations. That is in part because of his attempt to shine the light of recent social science research on the topic, and also because (as he shows so well) the enormous range and variety of faith-based organizations and the programs and services they provide make it impossible to be simply for or against them. As Wuthnow himself acknowledges, "faith-based services are a complex array of activities that sometimes work quite well... [but] are not easily encapsulated in a single phrase or expressed through a vivid anecdote" (6-7). The complexity and diversity of religious participation in social services makes overall assessments tricky at best. It's like saying whether one is for or against the media; it's just too big and undefined to warrant a blanket judgment.

The social scientific treatment of the topic is both a strength and a weakness. On the plus side, Wuthnow provides exhaustive reviews of available empirical evidence—including his own research—that contribute substantially to our understanding of what faith-based organizations are (and aren't) and what they do (and don't do). Wuthnow draws on several nationally representative surveys that he and his colleagues at Princeton conducted over the last decade. Armed with these data, Wuthnow is able to provide new understandings of several key areas often addressed by other scholars, including the social service activities of congregations, the activities of other faith-based organizations, and the relationship between and influence of religion and volunteering (a topic he has addressed in earlier books). For example, Wuthnow shows that proponents of the faith-based initiative are naïve in their expectation that churches can do substantially more than they're already doing to provide social services, particularly to those who are most disadvantaged. Virtually every congregation claims to engage in activities to help the poor and needy. However, because the majority of congregations in the U.S.A. are relatively small and have few resources, these activities are limited, and, as Wuthnow concludes, "most congregations [are] involved a *little* in social services, not more" (61).

Nevertheless, he also draws attention to the significant social programs run by some congregations, particularly larger African-American congregations located in

urban areas, congregations that have successfully partnered with government to provide housing, child care and after school care, job training and placement, welfare to work and other services. Despite these successes, these congregations make up only a small fraction of all American congregations and are not realistically going to be able to be transformed into the "armies of compassion" advocated by President Bush.

Wuthnow also examines the scope and activities of non-congregational religious organizations providing social services. Again, the variety is immense, ranging from enormous, bureaucratic national or international organizations such as the Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, or Catholic Charities, to small, local, independent agencies run out of a strip mall, a church basement, a home, or even the trunk of a car. A number of Wuthnow's findings are surprising and instructive. First, his analysis of several collections of data suggests that specifically religious non-profit organizations actually make up a smaller proportion of all nonprofit social service organizations than often assumed. Partly on the basis of estimates of religious participation in general (ranging from one-half to three-quarters of Americans, depending on definitions), it is often asserted that specifically religious organizations must also make up a similar proportion of nonprofit organizations. However, Wuthnow estimates that specifically religious organizations make up only twenty percent of all nonprofit social service organizations. This issue is complicated by another conclusion: that the line between faith-based and non-faith-based social organizations is much more gray than assumed. Since there are no existing lists of faith-based organizations, nor any agreed-upon criteria for what makes an organization religious, defining any particular organization as "religious" or "faith-based" is subject to interpretation.

Finally, Wuthnow tackles the question of effectiveness with the caution befitting a social scientist. He identifies two approaches taken by religiously affiliated social services organizations: a congregational model based on personal relationships between client and staff and focusing on the client's personal faith life; and the service-provision model that emphasizes the provision of expert services by a professionally trained staff person. Wuthnow concedes that when faith-based nonprofit organizations follow the congregational model, they are generally more effective than non-religious organizations. However, he also shows that relatively few faith-based organizations follow this congregational model, but rather use a service-provision approach, and thus, "there may be little reason to expect that faith-based organizations in general are more effective than nonsectarian organizations" (161).

In addition to these contributions, *Saving America?* also includes a rare look into how recipients of services provided by religious groups and organizations perceive

the importance of and effectiveness of religion. On top of the nationally representative surveys Wuthnow and his colleagues conducted, they also surveyed residents from low-income neighborhoods in a northeastern Pennsylvania county. Two findings are particularly of interest. First, on the basis of census data and his survey, Wuthnow found that 83 percent of low-income persons identify themselves as religious, and thus concludes that “religion is probably more important to the lives of lower-income people than the typical study of poverty would lead us to believe” (216). Perhaps more importantly for those who unequivocally support increased faith-based social service provision, Wuthnow found “no evidence . . . of recipients viewing faith-based organizations more favorably than secular nonprofits” (215). Instead, individual differences and circumstances had more influence on recipients’ perceptions of the service they received than whether the service was religious or secular. Related to this, Wuthnow also found that recipients did not perceive faith-based organizations (other than congregations) as being significantly more trustworthy or more effective in demonstrating unconditional love than secular organizations.

Wuthnow situates his analysis within a theoretical framework known as cultural—narrative sociology that suggests that one can only understand faith-based services within the larger cultural, historical, and institutional contexts and narratives in which they are embedded. For example, he describes how the opponents and supporters of President Bush’s faith-based initiative often operate from within very different “stories” of modernization and the role of religion. On one hand are opponents who view modernization as the progressive evolution of scientific and rational solutions to social problems, and who see religious solutions as antiquated, if not barbaric. On the other hand, supporters tend to view modernization primarily as the story of secularization in which a government / science / business elite became co-opted by secular humanists and who thus insidiously pushed religion to the margins of public life. Wuthnow claims that both of these versions are culturally embedded narratives, neither of which is true to the “facts.” As he makes clear in the introduction, his book attempts to remedy this: “Evaluating the contribution of American religion to the well-being of our society is thus a matter of *bringing hard facts to bear* on a number of difficult questions” (4; emphasis added).

Although Wuthnow’s empirical analysis is more than enough for one volume, and despite his use of a cultural and institutional framework, I found myself wanting more attention to some of the underlying questions about the roles and responsibilities of government and other institutions. As a sociologist, however, he appears to be primarily concerned with what is, rather than what should be. This approach is somewhat ironic, because, as a renowned sociologist of religion, Wuthnow might

be expected to be aware of the importance of values—or worldview—to scholarship; or, consistent with his use of a cultural—institutional framework, to recognize how his own analysis is itself culturally embedded. However, Wuthnow’s treatment of the topic follows the generally expected standards for sociology to be objective and neutral. Although Wuthnow is a Christian, a reader would be hard pressed to detect it from his book, or to understand how his faith shapes his analysis and conclusions.

What is perhaps most helpful about *Saving America*? is Wuthnow’s assertion, backed by evidence, that religion by itself cannot save America. He shows that as religion interacts in complex ways with other institutions (including government, other nonprofit organizations, businesses, and communities), it contributes to solving social problems, but it also is implicit in causing them at times. His recognition of the limits of what religion can do to address America’s social ills should not, however, be taken as evidence of his lack of faith for what religion can accomplish, or as opposing the multiple ways that religious organizations can be involved. Rather, Wuthnow argues persuasively that religion is so entwined with and enmeshed in American culture that it is impossible to conceive of civil society without it. Civil society, as Wuthnow defines it, is “the sphere of social relations and institutions that exists between the sphere of government and the sphere of for-profit market-oriented organizations” (22). For Wuthnow, however, civil society and religion are not simply collections of organizations, but, more importantly, relationships among people, and therefore, “[r]eligious organizations are important as anchors for many of the relationships that tie civil society together” (309).

One of the links that Wuthnow makes between religion and civil society also points to the limits of religion’s ability to address complex social problems. Wuthnow’s research shows that involvement in religion—primarily through congregations—does much more to facilitate *bonding* than *bridging*. That is, religious involvement strengthens people’s connections to others like themselves, but, despite some of the theological rhetoric, it actually does far less to help people build relationships with people who are different from themselves, particularly in terms of race and class. Wuthnow’s research challenges each of us involved in religious organizations, and challenges proponents of increased involvement of religious organizations, to examine to what extent these efforts address the substantial social inequalities that are at the root of many of the social problems we face. For, if religion and civil society cannot move each of us past the limits of “us” and “them,” then attempts to solve social problems with religion will never be more than individualized, band-aid solutions.