

Historical Perspectives on Faith-Based Organizations and Community Development

Heather A. Warren

Associate Professor of Religious Studies
University of Virginia

I. Introduction

My goal is to suggest some ways of how to think about faith-based organizations (FBO's) historically.

As much as I wish I did not have to, I will begin by addressing Marvin Olasky's book *The Tragedy of American Compassion* because it has been quite influential in evangelical and politically conservative circles with significant ties to political power.¹ In the preface to *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Charles Murray, a Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, boldly claimed that Olasky's book is "the recounting of an American history that today's Americans never learned."² And it is a good thing they have not learned it because it is far from the best example of the historian's art. Olasky, a journalist, wrote something far more akin to polemic than history. He would have us abandon the bad old days of the large welfare state spawned by the New Deal and enlarged through the Great Society, and return to the allegedly golden, more responsible days of antebellum America when "Human needs were answered by other human beings, not by bureaucracies, and the response to those needs was not compartmentalized."³ Our task, Olasky believes, is to "recapture the vision that changed lives up to a century ago"--a century in which, he argued, "our concept of compassion was not so corrupt" and the government had not usurped the role of the churches.⁴

As a historian and a theologian I want to diminish the credibility Olasky has enjoyed in the contemporary debate over aid to the needy. I have two reasons. One, is that Olasky never defines compassion beyond saying what its etymological meaning is: "to suffer with." Moreover, he never shows how those providing relief to the deserving poor actually suffer—what toll it exacted from

¹ Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992).

² Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, xv.

³ Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, xv.

⁴ Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 5.

them in ministering among the lower strata of American society. My second reason for criticizing Olasky's book is that it is badly crafted history. I could recite a litany of faults beginning with evidence, but will not add more because it would be lengthy, potentially boring, and more importantly take me away from the purpose of this presentation. Instead I want to tell you something about the way the academy has dealt with the subject of the history of American Protestantism and social reform. I also want to suggest some ways we might do this better, especially when we try to see today's FBO's in historical perspective and hear the questions raised by the FBO's we visited.

II. What Has Been Done and How It Has Been Done (Historiography)

I am addressing the history of white, American Protestantism—not Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Orthodoxy, or African American Protestantism—partly because none of those areas are my specialty, and partly because in the history of American Protestantism something of a canon has developed regarding the history of social reform and religion.

Historians of American Protestantism have tended to focus on distinct periods of reform with correlate issues and the Protestant role and influence in those reforms. Three periods have gained the most attention: i) the antebellum years (the three decades before the Civil War) with particular attention to issues of temperance, prisons, and slavery; ii) the era of the Social Gospel in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries with emphasis on the plight of laborers; and iii) the Civil Rights era with its focus on racism.

First, the antebellum period. As I noted a moment ago, the issues most often attended to in this period include temperance, prison reform, sabbatarianism, insane asylums, and slavery. But there are also the subjects of orphanages and education, religious as well as civic.⁵ Historians view

⁵ See: Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War* (New York: Harper, 1962); Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), and *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in*

the 1830s, 40s, and 50s as "a period of extraordinary spiritual, social, and cultural ferment" in which America matured into a nation. For many years a whiggish, progressivist perspective dominated, offering a narrative that told the story of "an advance from barbarism, cruelty, ignorance, and brutality to enlightenment."⁶ Historians who crafted this version were the esteemed Merle Curti and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. Though they criticized the antebellum reformers for their naivete and extremism (in contrast to the New Dealers they admired), they regarded the antebellum reformers as "the [rightly-guided] precursors of the struggles for the rights of labor, racial justice, and a modern welfare state."⁷ Two waves of revision followed. The first depicted the reformers as fanatics who hastened the onset of the Civil War. For example, Stanley Elkins saw abolitionists as irresponsible agitators who disdained established political channels and exploited America in a time when it lacked highly developed institutions.⁸ The second wave of revisionists were Marxist. They complained that antebellum reform, especially reform coinciding with the spread of revivalism, was "an instrument of social control and class domination [esp. middle class]."⁹ More recently this view has been criticized for being "excessively conspiratorial" and its proponents chided for failing "to distinguish the reformers' intentions from the consequences of reform."¹⁰ A sense of the "ambiguities" of reform in the antebellum era now rules the day.

Some, but not many, of the books written on this period attend to the theology of the time. One of the books that does a better job of this than others is Timothy Smith's *Revivalism and Social Reform*.¹¹ A major factor that he highlighted was the reemergence of an emphasis on "holiness" among Wesleyans and their sympathizers. Smith later said that were he to write the book again, he would make much more of the millennialism driving evangelicals who were reformers. (Paul Johnson paid attention to millennialism, but far more cynically.) More work could be done to identify the theology actually at work in the reformers and churches of this earlier period. Hymnology and studies of local congregation could be helpful here.

America (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Anne Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁶ Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, xv.

⁷ Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, xv.

⁸ Elkins, *Slavery*; see also Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, xvi.

⁹ Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*; see also Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, xvi.

¹⁰ Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, xvii.

¹¹ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957; rpt. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

Now for the social gospel. The issues most associated and examined in relation to this movement are economics and labor with a bit of concern over race relations. I need to begin by mentioning Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., again. In a seminal essay, he argued that the social gospel was "the response of reform-minded churchmen to the urban-industrial crisis of the late-nineteenth century" in which churchmen called attention to the legitimate complaints of labor and chastised the evils of capitalism.¹² This view dominated at least one generation of scholars, leading them to depict the social gospel largely as intellectual history and great man history, focusing on the ideas and publications of such men as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch.¹³ More recently this view has been challenged and alternative theses offered, though the focus remains principally on the ideas articulated about issues rather than reformist actions taken. Ralph Luker, in *The Social Gospel in Black and White*, argued that the social gospel was more of a conservative, backwards looking movement than a progressive one.¹⁴ Against the progressivist views of Schlesinger and his disciples, Luker argued that the social gospel was not "a radical critique of industrial capitalism," but "a growing conservative awareness that industrial capitalism had been the radical force in American society, generating social change of unforeseen consequence, heedlessly disruptive of human community."¹⁵ This approach, he said, helps make sense of the role or lack of a role that race relations played in the social gospel. He also questions if there really was a cohesive social gospel movement in the first place, because there were significant differences, personally and theologically, among its expositors. While I think Luker has a good point and makes us challenge our stereotypes and assumptions about the social gospel, I think there is a lot to the Schlesinger thesis, too. And, the Schlesinger and Luker theses are not incompatible: Schlesinger emphasizes discontinuities, while Luker calls our attention to the continuities. I think there is truth to both, and

¹² Arthur Meier Schlesinger, "A Critical Period in American Religion, 1875-1900," Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 64 (1932), 523-547.

¹³ Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in America, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); Aaron I. Abell, *The Urban Impact on American Protestantism, 1865-1900* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1943); Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper, 1949); Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman's Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

¹⁴ Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White*, 4.

it becomes interesting to explore how and why continuities and discontinuities could exist alongside each other and perhaps even feed each other.

Susan Curtis, in her book about the social gospel—*A Consuming Faith*--also challenged the Schlesinger thesis.¹⁶ She holds that on the one hand while the social gospel showed that salvation was as much a social as individual matter and demonstrated how Christian commitment could be translated into social action, on the other hand it contributed significantly to the consumerist culture that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century—usually understood as the shift from Victorian to Modern culture.¹⁷ In other words, Curtis thinks that what began as a movement of cultural criticism somehow merged with the dominant values of post-World War I America. I think this is questionable, but it reminds us to take a hard look at the relation between Protestant social movements and the way they can be co-opted unwittingly by the prevailing powers whether economic, political, or cultural.

Though the social gospel is a fairly well-ploughed field, much more could be done by examining it in a systematic theological way. As with the antebellum period, more could be done to identify and examine the theology at work—the theology or theologies that its participants actually lived—and the reasons for the consistencies and inconsistencies between a stated theology and what was done. As Luker suggests, closer attention to the theological differences instead of socio-political similarities among the social gospellers could also bear good fruit. Among other topics, such study would direct our attention to changing concepts of ministry and the churches' (or Church's) relation to the world. Greater attention to the "institutional churches" would help us understand one slice of Protestants' views about poverty, immigration, and the values of modern industrial society.

The civil rights movement. History about the civil rights movement has moved through distinct stages since the mid-1970s, and the issue it has focused on is racism. The first wave of writing was largely autobiographical—the story of the movement by the leading participants themselves. A second wave occurred when institutional and biographical studies started to appear. A good example is David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern*

¹⁶ Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Curtis, *A Consuming Faith*, 6.

Christian Leadership Conference.¹⁸ A third wave has begun to take shape and is being called for by such historic movement leaders as Julian Bond: it involves critical investigation of the movement and its leaders, and the examination of the role of the *many* not-so-famous participants.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, a corpus of theological study has developed that centers on Dr. King's writings and statements—monographs exploring the sources of his theology and comparisons of him and those whose thought he drew upon, for example Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch.

Our own Charles Marsh has examined a moment in the movement in terms of the theologies that informed and motivated a select group of diverse participants.²⁰ Charles' work reveals not only the lack of that kind of scholarship about the Civil Rights Movement, which was supposedly *so* religious, but it shows that the theology of the average person in the pew in the 1950s hasn't been identified or examined very well. I have recently done research on the mainline churches in this period and have found that existentialist theology "preached" in the mid-50s and early 60s, but no call to the barricades was issued by the white mainline preachers as a part of the existentialist message. Yet, that was the glue holding much of America together in a decade marked by a lot of anxiety that lay just below the surface in daily life—social as well as personal.

There are exceptions to the three-period scheme I have laid out, and I want to call two of them to your attention. One is a volume written by Robert Moats Miller (the same scholar who was Harry Emerson Fosdick's biographer). In *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939*, Miller tracked mainline congregations' views on the controversial issues he saw striking at the roots of American society in the interwar years: civil liberties, labor, race, war, and capitalism-communism-socialism.²¹ He distinguished these issues from ones he considered "essentially personal"—dancing, card playing, tobacco, whiskey, and immodest dress—and those on which there was little disagreement—prison reform, civic corruption, slums, and juvenile delinquency.²² Though striking out on a slightly different path, he did not attend to the ways that polity and

¹⁸ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Random House, 1986; Vintage Books, 1988);

¹⁹ James F. Findlay, Jr., *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²¹ Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

²² Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, vii.

theology, whether distinctively denominational or not, affected the social stances of the churches. He only attended to such factors which obviously shed light on the particular denominations' positions. Moreover, he assumed an acceptable distinction between personal and public issues. Such a distinction needs to be questioned and explored to learn if American Protestants of the 1920s and 1930s made such a clear delineation, particularly in their effort to legislate "private" morality as in the cases of prohibition and the place of religious education in elementary and secondary schooling.

A second exception to my three-period-scheme-with-corresponding-issues is the denominational approach in which a mainline denomination produced a volume (or two or three or four) about the history of that denomination in relation to domestic, social concerns. For example, in 1961 the Methodists issued a four-volume, commissioned work on *Methodism and Society*.²³ (For the record it strikes me as no accident that the Methodists undertook such a work at the very time church and society were coming to the forefront of church people's minds.) The four volumes divided the more general topic of *Methodism and Society* into the following categories: *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective*, *in the Twentieth Century*, *in Theological Perspective*, and *Guidelines for Strategy*. One aspect of this division bothers me especially: the divorce of theology and history. The theological perspective—I even venture to say "theological perspectives"—is or are part of the history. It is worthwhile to ask, What in theology and American culture—intellectual and middle class—was moving those scholars to divide the topics into those four parts? I think we should be asking the same question of ourselves as we try to wrap our minds around FBO's and church-related community development.

Three other areas of study should perhaps be considered as we try to locate FBO's in the greater context of American religious history: the history of religiously based communal experiments, church-state dynamics, and immigration history.²⁴ Regarding the history of communal experiments, perhaps we should ask about the extent to which FBO's are trying to build an alternative society or offer a communally distinctive alternative culture in light of previous attempts to establish such alternate communities as the Transcendentalists' Brook Farm and Clarence

²³ Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century*, *Methodism and Society* Volume III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961).

²⁴ Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

Jordan's Koinonia Farm. At the heart of it, this kind of consideration makes me wonder, What do we mean by the term "community" today--understood both in a religious sense and a non-specifically religious sense, and how do our answers to these questions differ from the way our predecessors answered or did not even consider such matters? Related to this is the question considered now and historically, What is the difference between so-called "Christian community" and church/the church?

The factor of church-state relations plays heavily into the recent creation of FBO's. What events in American history in general and in American religious life more specifically have given rise to the acceptability of Charitable Choice? Part of the answer has to do with the decline of anti-Catholicism.

Immigration history is appropriate, too, because many of the people at whom social reform programs have directed in the course of America's history have been immigrants, especially laborers. We cannot overlook today the tremendous influx of immigrants and the fact that FBO's are seeking to serve them. We also cannot overlook the fact that in the past settlement houses and mutual benefit/mutual aid societies arose from denominationally sponsored and parish-created efforts to meet the basic social needs of immigrants.

III. Directions for Further Study and Analysis

A. What historians offer FBO's

This selected overview of the historiography of mainline American Protestantism, especially American Protestantism and social reform, poses questions that we might ask of the FBO's as a way of understanding and assessing them better:

- What role does and should theology/doctrine play—overtly and covertly—in FBO's?
- Attention to the possible relation between the FBO's and the Civil Rights Movement generates a cluster of questions: What are the continuities and discontinuities between the Civil Rights Movement and the FBO's? What is happening ecumenically, if anything, in FBO's (because ecumenical participation in the Civil Rights Movement was significant)? What were the theological bases for understanding the relation between church and community that prevailed in the 1950s in the mainlines? In the 1960s?

-Are FBO's mission or evangelism? What is the difference between mission and evangelism? How has the relation between mission and evangelism been understood/changed in the history of mainline Protestantism? How have these changes competed with each other and affected social change efforts and engagement on the part of the churches?

-How have theologies affected Protestants' ideas about the causes of social ills and their remedies? (This will include ideas about human nature, God's intention for creation, what institutions are.) This will necessitate consideration of the eschatology articulated and/or assumed by the sponsoring bodies of the FBO's.

-How have these theologies been shaped by social conditions and cultural assumptions? To what extent have they accommodated to them? To what extent have they challenged them? To what extent are FBO's part of dominant culture (what have they imbibed from it), and to what extent are they challenging it?

-How do FBO's work out the tension between ministering to individuals and ministering to social structures and institutions (systemic matters)? Are they, in fact, working out of this tension? If so, how? If not, why not?

-How are or are not FBO's carrying out the churches' historic role in America as Toquevillian "mediating institutions"? What and how are they mediating?

-Why has America see the rise of Community Development Corporations (CDC's) since the 1960s and 1970s? What is the historic relation between CDC's and the churches? How did the Industrial Areas Foundation mobilize the churches?

-What has been the historic relation between the Protestant churches and American health care? How has this influenced organizational developments in American Protestantism and social reform?

B. How FBO's challenge historians

Just as history poses questions of and for the FBO's, I think the FBO's push historians to consider how we might write the history of Protestantism differently. Here are a few questions that come to my mind:

-How do we write American religious history in a way that includes the FBO phenomenon? The ways we have tended to write American religious history has been in terms of the

denominations or as movements (e.g., evangelicalism, revivalism, modernism), parachurch-bodies-cum-movement, or “great man” studies. To what extent are FBO’s part of a larger narrative about the history of evangelicalism and the mainline churches, and the long, historic relation between evangelicalism and the mainlines?

-How have “community” and “church” been preached in American history?

-What is the effect FBO’s are having on American denominationalism, if any, and how will we include that in our story of American religious history? What light might the FBO phenomenon shed on the history and future of denominationalism?

IV. Theology as an Analytical Tool in the Discipline of History

The above suggestions and identified challenges point to the need for greater consideration of theological categories in historical analysis. Because Protestants have lived their lives in the context of religious communities and ideas, we can gain a more complete understanding of people’s motives and aspirations if we explore the way their understandings of traditional Protestant doctrines--sin, grace, salvation, mission, the nature of God (to name a few)--did or did not find expression in their lives, socially as well as individually, and why. The daring might even learn more about the responsive relation between the divine nature and human nature as it has unfolded in time.