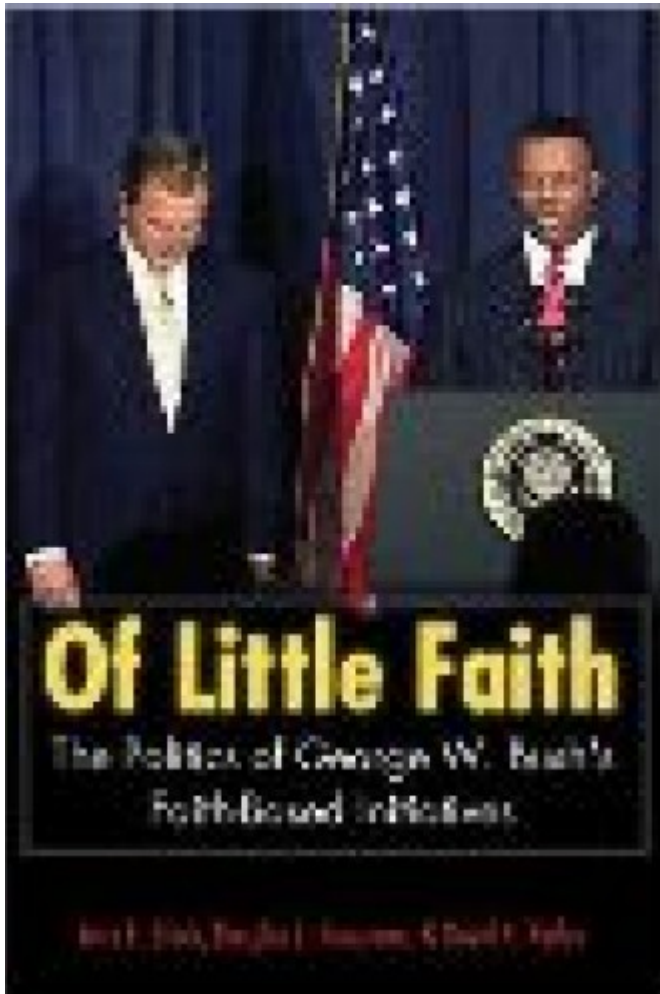


# Faith-based politics

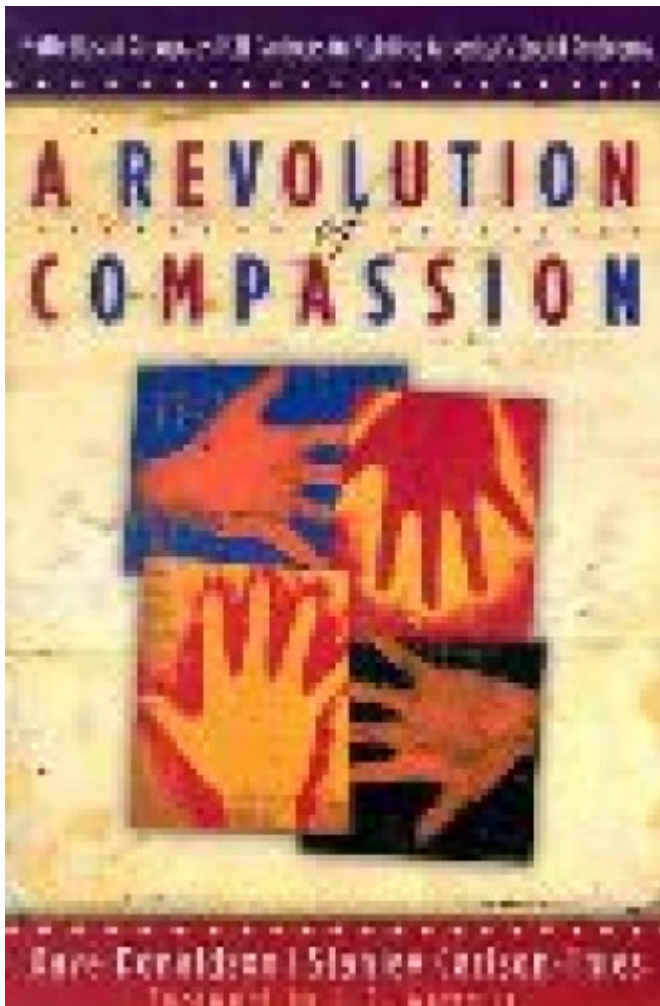
By [Arthur E. Farnsley II](#) in the [August 24, 2004](#) issue

## In Review



## **Of Little Faith: The Politics of George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives**

Amy E. Black, Douglas Koopman and David K. Ryden  
Georgetown University Press



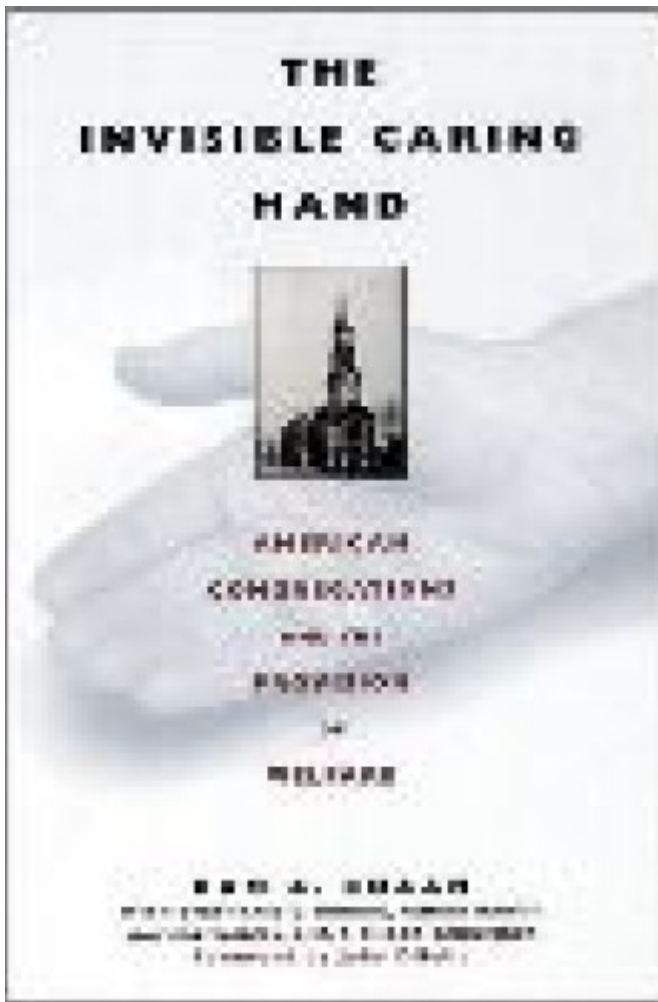
## **A Revolution of Compassion: Faith-Based Groups as Full Partners in Fighting America's Social Problems**

Dave Donaldson and Stanley Carlson-Thies  
Baker



## **A Limited Partnership: The Politics of Religion, Welfare, and Social Service**

Bob Wineburg  
Columbia University Press



## **The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare**

Ram A. Cnaan

New York University Press



## **Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society**

Robert Wuthnow

Princeton University Press

In his 2003 State of the Union Address, President Bush gave Christian conservatives a wink and a nod: “For so many in our country—the homeless and the fatherless, the addicted—the need is great. Yet there’s *power, wonder-working power*, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people . . . I ask you to pass both my faith-based initiative and the Citizen Service Act, to encourage acts of compassion that can *transform America one heart and one soul at a time*” (emphasis added).

The nod was to the view that social problems are not caused by institutional defects in the government or marketplace but by individual irresponsibility—hence the

solution is to change hearts and minds one by one. The wink was to a conservative, evangelical moral vision of transformation. Anyone who has ever attended a camp meeting knows that the “wonder-working power” is in “the blood of the Lamb.”

As promised, Bush expanded the Charitable Choice provisions encoded in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Under that law, religious groups can apply as contractors without having to suspend their religious character. If they wish, they can limit their hiring to co-religionists, pray with those they are serving or read scripture to them, and keep religious signs or symbols on the walls. They cannot, of course, use government funds overtly to evangelize or proselytize because that would constitute “establishment of religion.”

The 1996 law, enacted under the Clinton presidency, applied only to one specific pool of welfare money. Bush extended its legal principles to other programs and created faith-based suboffices in several cabinet departments. The federal government now encourages and supports faith-based participation by a wide range of organizations. However, Congress has lagged far behind the executive branch in embracing this shift, and the courts have not yet made a firm ruling on the issue.

Those who are interested in the nuts-and-bolts of the faith-based movement should read *Of Little Faith: The Politics of George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives*. It is a detailed account of legislative, executive and judicial processes, naming all the players and highlighting inside-the-beltway deals alongside public pronouncements. Those accustomed to reading analysis of faith-based reforms by sociologists, theologians and social workers can learn much from the political science perspective.

The real question facing the faith-based initiatives is not, as the media imply, whether government can fund religiously affiliated social services. Government at all levels has long given billions of dollars to contractors like Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army. Catholic Charities USA's Web site says that in 2000, 67 percent of the organization's \$2.7 billion budget came from government sources. The question is whether sectarian organizations—congregations, not just religiously affiliated nonprofits—can use government funds to deliver social services that promote faith-infused transformation. If the answer is yes, then congregations have considerable new latitude. But even congregations with no intention of applying for such funds are affected by the outcome, since this new way of framing the issue contributes to a public expectation that social-service delivery is the primary mission of churches.

There is a growing sense that social service is what congregations can, want and are supposed to do.

After 1996 scholars and policy analysts were quick to note that African-American congregations, many of which already were providing direct social services, would be most likely to benefit from these changes and most likely to apply for public funds. These scholars and analysts warned from the outset that evidence about the effectiveness of “transformative” faith-based programs was scant. They worried that policy was being made on the basis of rhetoric rather than data. During the past eight years data has trickled in, but its analysis inevitably has been politicized.

Dave Donaldson and Stanley Carlson-Thies’s *A Revolution of Compassion* is a case in point. It is not merely politicized; it is a manifesto. Donaldson and Carlson-Thies note that poverty is rising despite the hundreds of billions of public dollars spent to fight it. “What has gone wrong in this wealthy, well-educated nation?” they ask. “Topping the list of answers is the decline in personal responsibility of many Americans and the reluctance of too many churches to serve their needy neighbors as they should.” Those irresponsible Americans need “not only help, but also hope.” The reluctant church—especially the evangelical church—must begin a “slow recovery from its near abandonment nearly a century ago of social concern in its fight against the social gospel and theological liberalism.” To recover, the church must “seize today’s opportunity to collaborate with businesses, charities, and government. America needs a revolution!”

Donaldson and Carlson-Thies intentionally preach to the Christian conservative choir. They tell evangelical churches to be above reproach in their dealings with public money, but they also chastise them for providing too little social service. They dare them to “stand up to carping critics who have nothing real to object to but are just nostalgic for the old secularist days.”

It is tempting to pass this book off as propaganda, but no one should underestimate Carlson-Thies, who in 1992 began working, from his position at the Center for Public Justice, for the passage of Charitable Choice. Carlson-Thies literally wrote the book on implementation, providing guidelines currently used by prospective faith-based contractors around the country. He was briefly an assistant director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

*Revolution* is clear about what the law should be: “As long as people have a choice about where they go for help, then it should not be a problem if the government funds a program in which a person . . . becomes a good citizen, employee, and family member through religious transformation.” The book asks, “What if giving their hearts to Jesus is the way certain people stop giving their lives to alcohol or drugs? In that case, if the government funds the program, is it funding religion, which it shouldn’t, or an effective social service, which it should?” *Revolution* argues that government should ignore civil libertarians’ resistance and fund the service. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the authors, “the courts have not progressed as far as they should in this matter.”

This move toward government funding for sectarian, transformative programs is relatively recent, but Robert Wineburg places its origins two decades before *Charitable Choice*. “President Reagan had created a public devil—‘the government bureaucrat’—and a public model—the Good Samaritan,” he writes in *A Limited Partnership*. “The moral parameters of social policy debate and discussion were drawn by the Christian right,” most notably by analysts like George Gilder and Charles Murray. The book puts faith-based welfare reform in a specific context by studying the results of budget cuts and a corresponding new religious involvement in one particular town, Greensboro, North Carolina. Wineburg moves back and forth between national issues and local changes. He identifies the two policy poles as “institutional”—focusing on an entire social support system—and “residual”—focusing on individuals supported by families and the marketplace, with occasional government tweaking when things go awry. He shows how the two poles interact in his hometown.

Wineburg claims that the conservative, residual definition has captured the public square through its proponents’ superior use of the media. Congregations—especially mainline Protestant congregations—were forced by Reagan-era budget cuts to get more actively involved in providing services. As churches did more, conservatives pointed to this activity as evidence that they *could* do more. This led to the 1996 reforms meant to encourage sectarian groups to participate fully.

Wineburg’s jagged movement between national issues and local cases is occasionally hard to follow, but he provides bullet-point summaries at the beginning of each chapter. And his mix of the particular and the general is crucial to his conclusion that “as a society we would be better off focusing on partnerships in the indigenous local systems of service so that the voluntary spirit that drives a good



portion of the system can be nurtured.” He wants to draw attention to the local and particular, where he believes policy decisions should be made, but he refuses to take his eye off the national, where policy decisions are in fact being made.

Ram Cnaan’s *The Invisible Caring Hand* is less overtly political or prescriptive. It gives the most complete summary yet of the many benefits congregations provide to American society. Cnaan’s research involves multiple cities, though he does not use identical methods in studying them. He examines several models of ministry and estimates the total value of congregations’ contributions, taking into account not only money but also volunteer, clergy and staff time spent on community issues, the donated use of space and facilities, and the like.

Born in Israel and trained in the European model of social work, Cnaan is astounded by the amount of social-service work American congregations perform. His first book, *The Newer Deal* (Columbia University Press, 1999), examined the American partnership between social work and religion with fresh and astonished eyes. That book’s impressive lists of church contributions were seized upon by faith-based reformers to show how much weight the religious sector could carry. Wineburg was a contributing author to that book. The serious cautions in his own book stem directly from his concerns about the confluence of conservative political activism with the optimistic pronouncements of scholars like Cnaan and John Dilulio, who was briefly the White House’s director of Faith-based Initiatives.

Cnaan’s optimistic view of congregational capacity directly challenges sociologist Mark Chaves’s often-cited finding that most congregations are small and not especially involved in providing social services. The congregations Cnaan studies are much larger and contribute much more toward social services than the ones Chaves identified. Methodological details aside, Chaves said that congregations allocate approximately 3 percent of their total budgets to social-service and community programs. Cnaan, taking a much broader view of contributed “value,” claims the figure is almost 23 percent. He believes that his extended interviews revealed multiple indirect contributions that Chaves’s telephone interviews failed to note. Congregational leaders will be significantly affected by the manner in which this issue is framed, since policymakers and activists make decisions based on what they think congregations can do. Chaves is right that many congregations do very little social-service work and that their direct financial contributions toward social-service delivery are relatively small. But Cnaan is right that anyone counting only official congregational social-service programs and specific budget allocations misses much

of what churches do.

Pastors and laypeople sometimes wince when their contributions are underappreciated, but they should be equally wary of seeing their capacity for social-service delivery overestimated. Cnaan does *not* make the claim that congregations can do more. Indeed, he continues to believe that “state-run social service is the preferred method of social care.” He celebrates congregations for providing a safety net in a society that has “a general antipathy toward the poor and an emphasis on self-reliance.” But the big numbers he puts up will delight those who believe that congregations can and should shoulder a larger share of the load. Taking all factors, cash and noncash, into account, Cnaan estimates that the average congregation contributes \$184,000 per year to the community. Prudent people understand that most of this comes in the form of volunteer time and noncash support, that the majority of congregations provide far less, and that social need greatly overflows this crucial safety net. But some people will multiply \$184,000 by the approximately 300,000 U.S. congregations and mistakenly conclude that the church can contribute roughly \$55 billion to fixing the problems of needy individuals.

While these books take us deep into the debate on faith-based initiatives, Robert Wuthnow’s *Saving America?* takes a step backward to provide a look at the broader context. This elegantly written and ambitiously comprehensive book compares the different accounts of congregations put forth by Cnaan and Chaves, but adds data from the independent sector, Carl Dudley and David Roozen’s *Faith Communities Today*, and Nancy Ammerman’s *Pillars of Faith* as well as Wuthnow’s own research.

Wuthnow moves beyond congregations to talk about religion’s broader effect on volunteering, service recipients and social and human capital. He discusses important differences between congregations and other faith-based service organizations, not only because the latter spend much more money on social service than churches do, but also because their faith component is much more difficult to pinpoint. Most faith-based nonprofits have fully adopted a service-provider model, while most congregations hold to a religious-transformation model.

Few academic books provide such an Archimedean perspective because few scholars have such wide expertise. But even this broadly based, data-driven book concludes with an analysis of the conservative-liberal struggle embedded in the debate. Wuthnow draws the subtle distinction that “rhetoric about faith-based

programs has had one kind of impact on civil society while the reality of these programs has had quite a different effect.” The rhetoric promotes diversity and is especially attractive to conservative Christians and African Americans who feel their social programs have suffered from discrimination. “If diversity and the representation of diverse interests is good for democracy, then the discussion of faith-based service programs has apparently served America well,” Wuthnow states.

But the actual functioning of these programs is quite different. With greater government funding comes ever greater demand for uniformity. As a result civil society becomes even more homogeneous. “There is little evidence that government funding is an effective tool for promoting greater diversity or inhibiting the march of uniformity.” Homogeneity may be inevitable and perhaps even desirable for the faith-based nonprofits already in the service-provider mold, but Wuthnow joins the chorus of those warning congregations to “jealously guard their freedom” by being “wary of government support.” He ends, as Wineburg and Cnaan do, by arguing for religious organizations to do their part alongside other private organizations, while government does its part. He fears that “coming generations of community leaders” may be less committed to congregations’ unique role in civil society; consequently, faith communities will have to be “even truer to their mission than they have been in the past.”

Wuthnow is most concerned about how the hegemony of government standards eventually erodes the freedom and particularity of congregations—just as standardized tests have eroded the freedom and particularity of schools. He fears a society in which everything is prepackaged and “choice” is ephemeral, where outcomes-based efficiency becomes the lowest-common-denominator criterion. Because he, like Cnaan, does not frame the issue as a struggle for political power, he sees this homogenization as the greatest threat to civil society.

Wuthnow seriously underestimates conservative activists who *have* defined this issue as a struggle for political power. Activists such as Carlson-Thies and Amy Sherman welcome outcome-based efficiency as the standard because they are confident that sectarian programs with significant spiritual content do a good job. They believe that pure proceduralism—stripped of liberal moral content—will actually protect the rights of religious conservatives to lead people to Jesus, so long as their programs are shown to have objective outcomes as good as or better than secular programs.

Christian conservative activists would say they are not asking the government to have morally conservative values; they are just asking it not to have liberal ones. If a Baptist children's home is using government funds to get the job done well by objective standards, why should government care if the Baptist home doesn't choose to hire women, Jews, African Americans or gays and lesbians? What difference does it make if kids find the answers they need in religious transformation? The liberal answer is that if all of us, in the form of taxes, are paying, then contractors' programs must exhibit the government's values of fairness and equal opportunity. Conservatives say that if the goal is efficiency, then values—sectarian or not—are not the issue. If transformation works, why not pursue it, as long as everyone has the option to choose a nonsectarian provider? (It remains to be seen whether this proceduralism will be applied to prison ministries conducted by the Nation of Islam, for example.)

Conservative activists want government to stop enforcing a liberal version of America in which principles of nondiscrimination are more important than particular religious or moral beliefs. Little wonder, then, that gay and lesbian advocacy groups like Lambda are joining with the ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State as the most vocal critics of faith-based reforms. These groups argue that civil liberties are in fact more important than particular beliefs when public money is involved.

At stake is defining the proper relationship between government and its thousands of nonprofit contractors. Liberals want government to say, "Service providers can pursue any religious or moral ends with their own money, but when they use public money they must follow the rules government follows. Even if their transformative methods work, they constitute an example of government establishment of religion." The conservatives reply, "Public money is as much ours as yours. Government pays religious providers to get results, not to establish religion. And those providers will get results because they know what people really need."

Beyond the issue of civil liberties lies a more prosaic political point: the possibility for a greater alliance between African-American Christians and white evangelicals. This potential is not lost on the Bush administration. Even if such an alliance is a long shot, a president who received less than 10 percent of the African-American vote has little to lose by emphasizing the increased availability of funds for black church social-service programs. When the president touts his faith-based initiatives for the camera, he is usually surrounded by African-American pastors.

When Bush called forth the “armies of compassion,” he asserted that they could get results that secular service providers, including government, could not. From that moment, scholars and analysts began asking whether the evidence supported his claims. The books reviewed here provide some early attempts to collect and consider that evidence. But the more careful scholarly efforts, especially Cnaan’s and Wuthnow’s, may be drowned out by political rhetoric. As Wineburg has warned, conservative activists are driven more by their vision of what policy should be than by an analysis of community infrastructures. Since these activists believe the most crucially needed transformation is individual, they have argued for religious transformation as a legitimate means of doing government-funded social work. They have portrayed congregations as alternative, and ultimately preferable, social-service providers.

This mischaracterization of congregations has two unfortunate consequences. First, it creates unrealistic expectations of what congregations are and what they do. Most congregations are involved in some form of social-service delivery, but that is not their only, or even their primary, mission. Those who judge congregations solely by the social services they deliver miss the enormous public benefit they provide by building character. Faith communities make one kind of contribution when they do good as organizations; they make a different, and even more important, contribution when they nurture virtuous, committed people who live out their values in many different kinds of organizations.

An even worse consequence of misreading congregations is that it sets up a model of competition where a model of cooperation might have stood. When congregations are described as alternative service providers, they are pitted against secular agencies and even faith-based nonprofits. The question then becomes, “Who transforms individuals more effectively?” It would be preferable to consider the ecology of the entire community, and the way different organizations—congregations, governments and secular and religiously affiliated nonprofits—each play a different but complementary role.

Communities, especially at-risk communities, do not benefit from the ways in which congregations have been mischaracterized and welfare reform has been politicized. Unless the scholarship in these books informs political opinion in ways that generate political action, policies will be set and institutions will be remodeled not by those with the most carefully considered arguments but by those who drew the battle lines and set out to win.