Making Others Conditions Our Own:
Faith-Based Initiatives and Other Mediating Structures as Public Policy

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This paper will briefly examine efforts by the state to address social welfare problems and will subsequently argue that mediating structures, specifically faith-based organizations, do a better job of addressing these problems by creating and sustaining social capital, and therefore ought to be encouraged and employed as public policy. Specifically the Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus article, To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy, has provided a valuable framework for much of this analysis.

INTRODUCTION

John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, famed for calling America “a city on a hill,” expressed another vision for the new found continent. Winthrop said “We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of a body” (Bellah, Madson, Sullivan, Swindler & Tipton, 1996). Winthrop envisioned a community of cooperation where neighbor cared for neighbor and all were yoked with the responsibility of addressing such social ills as poverty. This essay will argue that this vision of community should be encouraged, but not administered, by the state. We should look to private means to address the rampant unemployment, homelessness, illiteracy and other social health problems that plague our society. These private means include mediating structures, like neighborhoods and churches.

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THE WELFARE STATE

America’s short history offers an amazing breadth of implementations, attempted and otherwise, of Winthrop’s vision. The 20th century in particular saw two major efforts by the United States government to address social problems. The New Deal, passed in response to the Great Depression, saw an explosion in the federal government’s role in society. Historian and former FDR speechwriter Samuel Beer said that the New Deal created “among Americans the expectation that the federal government could and should deal with the great economic questions...” (Joyce & Schambra, 1996, p. 19). That expectation increased about 30 years later when President Johnson launched his “war on poverty” and introduced the widely criticized Great Society. Authors Michael Joyce and William Schambra, with tongue in cheek, wrote that the Great Society came the closest to the progressive ideal: “public policy securely in the hands of an elite cadre of professionals, dispensing programs through vast, gleaming, rational bureaucracies...” (1996, p. 20). Whether for good or for ill, the New Deal and Great Society created programs, bureaucracies, and regulations that were all focused on improving the social standing of Americans. Winthrop’s vision of making others’ plights our own was channeled through at least one, if not several, government agencies and programs. Power and responsibility to address social ills were transferred to the federal government, creating what many consider the American welfare state.

This top-down approach to social problems left (and still leaves) many with a bad taste in their mouth. Rather than receiving warming face-to-face interaction, those seeking help are forced to deal with faceless agencies and unwieldy regulations, and often complain about the speed and quality of service. Many see the welfare state as a government attack “against the traditional prerogatives of locality and neighborhood to define and preserve their own ways of life” (Joyce & Schambra, 1996, p. 22). It is an attack on social capital.

Social capital, as defined by author Robert Putnam (2000), refers “to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p.19). Social capital gives value and meaning to living and participating in one’s community. It gives value to
our democracy; and its absence threatens to tear at our foundation. Members of a society that lacks social networks, trust, and cooperation do not seek to make others’ conditions their own. A society that lacks social capital certainly does not labor and suffer together. Indeed, social capital is the modern-day expression of Winthrop’s vision. It emphasizes “a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks” (Putnam, “Social Capital” n.d.).

The creation of social capital is encouraged by a bottom-up approach. Thus, while a welfare state leaves people feeling disconnected and disempowered, local trust, cooperation, and participation in social networks empowers people. The welfare state clogs up connections between individuals. Instead, individuals create connections with government agencies. This awkward relationship with the government does little to build social networks and trustworthiness. Joyce and Schambra noted that many remarked on the awkwardness of this relationship, including Senator Robert Kennedy. They reported that “He argued in To Seek a Newer World that the nation’s slums could be transformed only through ‘new community institutions that local residents control, and through which they can express their wishes’” (1996, p. 21). Such institutions would encourage face to face interaction and create social networks and trustworthiness; in short, they create social capital. Joyce and Schambra, again quoting Senator Kennedy, pointed out that this objective had become “increasingly difficult in the face of the giant organizations and massive bureaucracies of the age” (p.21).

Winthrop’s vision of community concern and cooperation did not die. Discussion continued around the ineffectiveness of the welfare state and its attack on social capital. Some, including Richard John Neuhaus and Peter Berger, offered up viable alternatives to the cumbersome welfare state. In 1976, they published an article entitled: To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy. The article was reprinted in a 1996 book of essays about mediating structures. In the article they defined mediating structures as “those institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life” (p. 158). These institutions - like neighborhood and church, may be manifestations of Senator Kennedy’s “community institutions” that he deemed most appropriate to combat social ills.

How and what do these structures/institutions ‘mediate’? Neuhaus and Berger explained that life is divided into two spheres: public and private. Public life, or society, is ruled by megastructures or “large economic conglomerates of capitalist enterprise, big labor, and the growing bureaucracies that administer wide sectors of the society” (p. 158). Private life is controlled by the individual with relatively little institutional support. We spend our life constantly roving between the two spheres. The authors wrote that there is a double crisis between these two spheres. First, “Meaning, fulfillment, and personal identity are to be realized in the private sphere . . . in private life the individual is left very much to his own devices, and this is uncertain and anxious” (Neuhaus & Berger, p.159). The second crisis comes in balancing between the two spheres. “It is a political crisis because the megastructures (notably the state) come to be devoid of personal meaning and are therefore viewed as unreal or even malignant” (Neuhaus & Berger, p. 159). Individuals who use mediating structures are more successful in this balancing act. “Such institutions have a private face, giving private life a measure of stability, and they have a public face, transferring meaning and value to the megastructures” (Neuhaus & Berger, p. 159). This stability and value are provided by social capital, through the trust and cooperation of citizens on a local level, rather than faceless government agencies.

Concerns About Mediating Structures

To many this sounds like the normal, anti-government rhetoric we have come to expect from the Right. In their book Free Spaces, Sara Evans and Harry Boyte (1986) quote John Neuhaus and Peter Berger who said “Without mediating structures, the political order is [unsettled] by being deprived of the moral foundation upon which it rests” (p.186). This view sees social change as a deficiency or lack of community. Evans and Boyte argued that such a defensive stance “produces a political and social vision which contributes to the erosion of the very community institutions neoconservatives purport to support” (p.186). Mediating structures are thus very narrow, and do little to create bridging or inclusive social capital. Rather, structures like families, neighborhoods, and churches more often create bonding, or exclusive social capital. By nature these structures are exclusive, requiring those who wish to enter and or be accepted to adapt to certain norms and morals. Evans and Boyte fear that this exclusion erodes and tears at the fabric of society and our democracy.

Evans and Boyte also pointed out that the mediating structures theory provides no ideas for “collective action to regain control over massive economic dislocations . . . nor any notion of how different communities might join together to pursue a common good” (Evans & Boyte, 1986, p.186). Mediating structures are often smaller scale local entities not capable of addressing massive economic dislocations. The authors summed up their criticism by saying “Conservatives [believe] in defending voluntary, autonomous groups against the force of the modern state” (Evans & Boyte, p. 187). Mediating structures are in a battle against government or simply put “the problem” (Evans & Boyte, p.186). This struggle between the two ends up leaving our democracy weak and fragile.

Are these valid concerns? Can relying on mediating structures to address social ills and foster community be so dangerous? Do mediating structures help or hurt efforts to create and sustain community? Do they help create social capital, the indispensable adhesive that holds our democracy together? The answers to these questions are complex, but to
their credit, Neuhaus and Berger readily admit that there is no panacea to social problems; they do not even suggest that the welfare state should be totally abolished. They simply see mediating structures as “alternative mechanisms . . . to provide welfare-state services” (Neuhaus & Berger, 1996, p. 158). Neuhaus and Berger do not, as their critics do, frame the issue as mediating structures versus the state but rather mediating structures and the state versus social problems.

**Creating Social Capital**

How do mediating structures create social capital? Authors Richard Couto and Catherine Gunthrie (1999) identify three ingredients for mediating structures to create social capital. For starters, mediating structures, by nature, improve social interaction. Families, neighborhoods, churches and voluntary organizations often bring people together in “a community greater than the accident of space and time” (p. 209). These communities provide a forum where individuals can connect and plant seeds that will blossom into trust and enduring social networks.

The struggle to maintain their traditions, values, and roots can bring citizens together to form mediating structures, just like the Brumley Gap (Virginia) Concerned Citizens that “developed new forms of support and trust during its five-year-long, successful effort to block a hydroelectrical project that would have flooded its community” (Couto & Guthrie, 1999, p.72). The fight against the powers that fostered a certain trust and faith among the citizens that caused one citizen, Mike Wise, to say “If I need a piece of equipment, I know I can get it from a neighbor. If I need a helping hand to move something, here I know I can get it. If we had to move to the city, I’m afraid we’ll lose these things” (Couto & Guthrie, p. 89). Mediating structures bring people together who otherwise may never have met, let alone built lasting social networks.

The ability of mediating structures to sustain these social networks is the second important ingredient. They do this by keeping community members involved. Whether through membership meetings, outreach programs or emphasizing member relationships, mediating structures act as social entrepreneurs that bridge the primary and secondary members of a community (Couto & Guthrie, 1999, p. 219).

These members must catch the vision of the community or mediating structure. This third ingredient is essential to the vitality of a structure. Having a defined purpose to rally around keeps people coming back, focuses their work, and often provides some sort of mechanism to measure success. Couto and Guthrie cited the example of the Safe-Space shelter, created to provide haven “for women and children threatened with physical harm” (Couto & Guthrie, 1999, p. 221). In short mediating structures provide and sustain a forum where people can gather together, form bonds, and take action against a common problem. This is an example of social capital.

**Faith Based Initiatives**

To more easily examine the possibilities of social capital and mediating structures I chose to focus on one structure – the church. Religious institutions are “singularly important to the way people order their lives and values at the most local and concrete levels of existence. Thus they are crucial to understanding . . . other mediating structures of empowerment” (Neuhaus & Berger, 1996, p. 185). The authors note that due to its vital nature, religion should be at the forefront of any social policy decisions.

However, any attempt to include religion has been distorted by the fact that “The view that the public sphere is synonymous with the government or the formal polity of the society has been especially effective in excluding religion from considerations of public policy” Neuhaus & Berger, 1996, p. 185). The passage of the Welfare Reform Act in 1996 saw a change in this exclusionary attitude. Portions of this act, often referred to as ‘charitable choice,’ eased restrictions and the processes by which faith-based organizations could apply for and receive social-service grants (Eastland, 2001). In 2001, President George W. Bush expanded the scope of charitable choice. In one of his first acts as President, he created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. In the executive order creating the FBCI President Bush said “Faith-based and other community organizations are indispensable in meeting the needs of poor Americans and distressed neighborhoods” (Exec. Order No. 13199, C.F.R. 8499, 2001).

Attempts have been made to make a case for and against this faith based initiative by examining solely whether or not such organizations are as effective as secular or government organizations in fulfilling their social mission. This is difficult to measure due to the “general dearth of attention to the ‘faith factor’ in academic research” (Sherman, 2003, p. 21). The difficulty is magnified when considering that the two types of organizations may focus on different clientele, as well as administer their programs in significantly different ways. Despite these difficulties considering both empirical and anecdotal evidence are essential in assessing assertions that faith-based organizations are effective in delivering social services.

**Empirical Examination**

In measuring the effectiveness of faith-based versus secular organizations social scientists have often examined the perceptions of social service recipients. One such study asked recipients to grade assistance received through service organizations “in terms of its effectiveness in meeting your need” (Wuthnow, 2004, p. 207). Four types of service organizations were considered: Public Welfare Department, Secular Non-Profit Organization, Faith-Based Organization, and Local Congregation. Participants in the survey graded their experience on a typical A, B, C, D, F scale. The congregation received the highest grades; 70% of the respondents gave the

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congregation an A grade and 22% gave it a B. The G.P.A. of the congregation was 3.59 (roughly in the A- range) compared to 3.13 for the faith based organization and 3.10 for the secular non-profit. These numbers represent a B+ grade. The percentage of recipients grading the faith-based organization and secular non profit with an A grade were very similar, 44% and 38% respectively. Wuthnow pointed out “As for faith-based organizations there is little evidence that they are perceived as being more effective than secular nonprofits . . . there is [also] no evidence that clients perceive faith-based organizations to be any less effective than secular nonprofits” (Wuthnow, p. 208, emphasis in the original). All three mediating structures scored significantly higher than the public welfare department, which came in with a 2.47 G.P.A. (approximately a C+ grade).

Clearly mediating structures, specifically those that are faith-based, scored higher in perceived effectiveness. Wuthnow suggested several explanations for the differences. One was the distance between the recipients’ home and the chosen service organization. For example, he reported that the average distance between home and the public welfare department was 4.3 miles, compared to an average distance of 1.2 miles for the faith-based organization, and less than one mile for the congregation (Wuthnow, 2004, p. 209). He also suggested “that it is probably their ability to forge encompassing whole-person, personally transforming relationships with clients that accounts for any success they have” (Wuthnow, p. 159). The “whole-person” concept relates directly to the creation of social capital and will be further scrutinized in the next section.

In 2002 the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania published a report entitled “Objective Hope: Assessing the Effectiveness of Faith-Based Organizations: A Review of the Literature.” The report centered on a study of the results of 25 studies that had examined the effectiveness of faith-based organizations. The authors reported that 11 of the 25 studies were multivariate, and that in all but one of these 11 “the faith-based program or initiative under study was found to be significantly more effective” (Johnson, Tompkins, & Webb, 2002 p. 19).

One of these studies examined the effect of religious programs on recidivism in groups of inmates from prisons in New York State (Johnson, Larson, & Pitts, 1997). Recidivism is defined as “A tendency to lapse into a previous condition or pattern of behavior; especially, a falling back or relapse into prior criminal habits” (Dictionary, n.d.).

The study examined a report that had been commissioned in 1991 by the Prison Fellowship Ministries (PFM). PFM is a non-profit volunteer ministry that uses Bible study and other religious based activities to help prisoners. The study reexamined the report’s data to determine whether the PFM programs affected inmate behavior (Johnson, et al., 1997). The study reported that “after controlling for level of involvement in Prison Fellowship sponsored programs, inmates who were most active in Bible studies were significantly less likely to be rearrested during the one-year follow-up period . . . there was a statistically significant parallel between increases in program participation and reductions in the level of recidivism among former inmates.” (Johnson, et al., 2002, p.19).

The findings of one more study are relevant here. A 2001 article published in the Journal of City and State, examined the work of faith-based organizations in two Michigan counties. In Ottawa County the organizations included Good Samaritan Ministries (GSM) and in Kent County the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism (GRACE) (Soonhee, 2001, p. 3). The state contracted out job mentoring programs to these two organizations.

Through face-to-face and phone interviews with project coordinators, as well as participatory observation the author found that there were several advantages to this arrangement. First among them was the ability of the faith-based organizations to provide services not otherwise provided by Michigan’s Family Independence Agency (FIA) (Soonhee, 2001, p. 41). The second finding is most intriguing. There was a “higher quality of service through faith-based organizations’ experiences in mentoring programs” (Soonhee, p. 41). The author attributed this higher quality to the same “whole-person” treatment described above. “This study found that GSM and GRACE emphasized the overall quality of clients' life as criteria for the success of mentoring program, in addition to the client’s ability to retain employment” (Soohnee, p. 41).

These studies demonstrate a trend identified in the Objective Hope report, as well as other empirical findings. The findings strengthen claims that faith-based organizations are effective in delivering social services. Of particular interest in the findings is the reference to the “whole-person” treatment. As was mentioned above this treatment relates to the creation of social capital. A review of anecdotal evidence demonstrates that social capital is crucial to this empirical success of faith-based organizations.

**Faith-Based Organizations and Social Capital**

Professor William Lockhart (2005) compared secular and faith-based organizations “seeking to determine what social ties these programs developed and what norms of relationship were taught and observed” (p. 49). What he discovered was a sharp contrast in the focus or vision of the organizations. For example, in their mission statement faith-based organizations explicitly claimed a desire to “build relationships and a sense of community (i.e. social capital)” (Lockhart, p. 50). The secular non-profit organizations articulated a more task oriented approach.

It is tempting to apply the old cliché about actions speaking louder than words; in other words results, and not vision, are what counts. However do not underestimate the importance of vision. Remember, according to Couto, a common vision is essential to not only building social capital but having it endure. A lack of vision among service providers may
lead to the impersonality that so many complain about plaguing the institutions of the welfare state. By explicitly stating their belief in relationship and community, building faith-based organizations engender a forum of trust, which is one of four characteristics that welfare recipients revealed to Amy Sherman as important to the success of faith-based organizations. She reported that "clients engaged more thoroughly with the helpers they found at the faith-based organization, because they trusted those helpers more than they did staff at government agencies" (2003, p. 22). The other characteristics included: accessibility, or the fact that help was available "24-7-365"; individuality – faith-based organizations did not treat them like a number — and flexibility; "they felt that their individual problems had been examined and that a personalized action plan had been constructed." Each of these four characteristics stems from having a vision, rather than a list of tasks, to perform.

Sherman (2003), pointed out that

"All these may be statements that make social science researchers a bit uncomfortable, but these are the very things reported by many successful clients themselves. Clearly, for many participants in religiously affiliated initiatives, the program worked because it brought them into a faith that decisively changed their lifestyle for the better" (p.22).

What motivates and inspires the volunteers and clients clearly goes a long way in producing results, even though they may not be easily measurable by scientific means.

Key to any discussion about social capital is to distinguish between bridging and bonding social capital. As previously noted, critics often levy the accusation that faith-based organizations may be excellent at bonding but are very poor at bridging. Studies indicate otherwise. Wuthnow, Hackett, and Hsu (2004), conducted a survey of 2,000 residents of low-income neighborhoods and the service organizations these residents contacted seeking help. They concluded that “faith-based organizations attract a diverse constituency of people with serious needs and that they play a positive role in addressing those needs” (p. 14). Faith-based organizations, like other service organizations are able to attract and serve people from all walks of life and build social bridges.

Lockhart (2005), noted that by their design “faith-integrated classes also reduced social distances and promoted multifaceted interactions between clients, staff-members, and volunteers” (p. 54). He then described observing ‘circle-up’ time, held at the beginning of each class. During this time participants hold hands, sing, and pray. Lockhart noted that at first everyone was hesitant, but as time went on, “hugs were commonplace” (Lockhart, p.54). Clients, staff, and volunteers represented several classes and races. ‘Circle-up’ time broke down these barriers and bridged the gaps. Lockhart also described one particularly hesitant participant who eventually opened up and expressed “how she used to ‘feel evil all over her,’ but now she feels hope and love” (Lockhart, p. 54).

Critics would decry the religious nature of this activity and its seeming lack of relevance in helping these people find jobs. However, the activity did “build social capital and religious cultural skills which built self confidence and opened the door for further social ties . . .” (Lockhart, p. 55).

So, one may ask, what does this all mean? How does creating social capital qualify mediating structures as a viable partner to the welfare state? Simply put, the social capital created and perpetuated by faith-based organizations empowers people. The values and social skills that are stressed in faith-based organizations give people a certain self-confidence that can’t be found in job-skill training; it is the “whole person” treatment that sets them apart. Sherman (2003) observed that faith based organizations are “holistic – they seek to find ways to meet clients’ wide-ranging needs, including those that might not initially seem to be relevant to the particular program at hand” (p. 23). Sherman gives the example of a woman who may be in a job-training program who is helped by the faith-based organization to kick out an abusive boyfriend who is leeching on what little funds she does bring in (Sherman, p. 23). With him around, it would be difficult for this woman to escape poverty. What is more, perhaps the boyfriend would like to get job training but is ineligible for some government programs. Sherman pointed out that faith-based organizations do not usually have stringent eligibility requirements (Sherman, p. 23). The faith-based organization could in turn help this boyfriend get training and a job, lessening his burden on the woman. All this occurred because she gained not only work-skills, but was socially empowered through a process that was facilitated by the faith-based organization.

**Mediating Structures as Public Policy**

If anecdotal as well as empirical evidence suggests faith-based organizations and other mediating structures are effective in building social capital and empowering people then why haven’t they been more widely implemented as public policy? Money is certainly a major factor. Faith and community based organizations simply lack the massive amounts of funding available to government and other secular programs. Second, secular programs can compete for grants that are not open to faith based programs because of their religious nature. Opponents claim that government funding for religious programs is a violation of the First Amendment.¹ A third factor is that even some religious people and organizations are opposed to receiving federal funding, fearing that any plan to distribute such funds would “[force] the nation’s good Samaritans to secularize themselves in exchange for federal money” (Loconte, 2001).

¹The author realizes that concerns about potential violations of the First Amendment as it relates to church versus state relations are at the heart of any discussion concerning the role of religious institutions in public policy. An in-depth discussion of the church v. state issue is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, this paper offers an example of potential cooperation between religions and the government.
Neuhaus and Berger anticipated this debate about the possibility of using mediating structures in the public policy process. They made no attempt to resolve the debate but rather proposed both a minimalist and maximalist approach. The minimalist proposition holds that public policy should not undercut mediating structures. A minimalist fears the taxation and regulations that structures would have to accept along with federal dollars. The maximalists argue that “public policy should utilize mediating structures as much as feasible” (Neuhaus & Berger, 1996, p. 193). Setting aside the church versus state debate, and assuming that religion should play some role in society, one must consider these approaches as to the appropriate use of mediating structures. If the maximalist approach is to succeed then the structures must develop a working relationship with government and in all likelihood accept some sort of federal funding. Minimalists see such a relationship and acceptance as steps on the road to mediating structures becoming corrupt and shadows of their former selves.

**MINIMALIST APPROACH**

Douglas J. Besharov, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute a Washington-based think-tank, outlined three axioms of the minimalist perspective regarding federal funding of mediating structures. The first states “Direct government funding of social welfare agencies (including mediating structures) is likely to create the wrong winners and losers” (1996, p. 125). Besharov argued that government tries to pick the best service provider, discounting the thoughts, feelings, and preferences of millions of consumers (p. 125).

The second axiom represents a real fear and a reality for many organizations. “Direct government funding of social welfare agencies can alter the nature of their services and raise their costs” (Besharov, 1996, p. 125). The government money often comes with stipulations and regulations attached that force these agencies to change the way they do things. One head of an inner-city faith based organization said “They [the government] make it difficult for us to do what you know people need because they tell people they have to leave [the program after a period of time]” (Monsma, 2003, p. 14). This particular organization spent its own money in an effort to set up programs that allowed for some continuity to counter the restrictive government regulations.

The third axiom is somewhat an extension of the first. “Direct government funding often requires mediating structures to abandon the very features, like religious activities, that make them effective” (Besharov, 1996, p. 125). These requirements, again, often come in the form of regulations or mandates in order to receive the funding. Stripping faith-based organizations of their religious features can be quite damaging. Remember the group that used “circle-up” time! To strip this time of its prayers and sharing of faith-promoting experiences would undercut the very pieces that make this puzzle fit.

These three axioms represent the surface of a more deeply rooted problem identified by Michael Horowitz. A former Reagan administration officer, Horowitz described the struggle between what he termed the rights regime and the contract regime (1996, p. 67). These two legal visions have been engaged in a “competition for moral and operational supremacy” (p. 67). The contract regime represented by mediating structures, defines and sets its norms through communities. In contrast, the rights regime seeks a nation where norms are defined and administered on a national level by the judiciary. Horowitz argued that the “rights regime” fails to realize “that real freedom and the promise of human dignity come from allowing people to shape the communities in which they live” (Besharov, 1996, p. 83).

This struggle comes to a head in Besharov’s axioms; under the rights regime government funding allows the government to determine how mediating structures are run, thereby denying real freedom. Defenders of the rights regime often claim that they do so in order to help the poor. Horowitz pointed out that the exact opposite is true. Poor people do not have private means to seek help and therefore turn to public institutions. If these public institutions, (mediating structures) have been restricted by government regulations and thereby rendered ineffective, then the poor are negatively affected. They receive little, if any, lasting help at all. Under the rights regime the government is empowered, not the people.

Horowitz and others make the argument that as presently structured accepting government funding restricts and limits the effectiveness of mediating structures. If mediating structures are beholden to such a system, not only is the quality of social services adversely affected, but community and social capital are stifled.

Many people have a difficult time fully accepting these arguments. The minimalist approach attempts to demonize the government to some extent, making relationships between mediating structures and government appear undesirable and inherently antagonistic. The minimalist approach lends itself to one of the criticisms we discussed earlier, namely that by defining government as “the problem” one pits mediating structures against government. This creates unnecessary tension and limits mediating structures, just as if they are fettered with regulations. By refusing, as minimalists suggest, to work with government (or at least severely limiting relations), mediating structures are cut off from the enormous amounts of funding that government offers. This limits their reach, leaving government - with its regulations and bureaucracies - to administer the majority of social welfare programs. In other words, we are back where we started: status quo.

What government and advocates of mediating structures need is a paradigm shift. Neuhaus and Berger articulated this shift when they first laid out mediating structures. The authors admitted that mediating structures may not be able to
solve all problems, but indicated that “they could become the basis of far-reaching innovations in public policy, perhaps of a
new paradigm for at least sectors of the welfare state” (Neuhaus & Berger, 1996, p. 158). Becoming part of the pub-
clic policy making process would obviously involve coopera-
tion with the government. Such cooperation seems inherent
in the definition of mediating structures “those institutions
standing between the individual in his private life and the
large institutions of public life” (Neuhaus & Berger, p. 58).
The idea is not to keep the two totally separate, but to adjust
or mediate them until they fit together.

Maximalist Approach
Improperly structured government can cause problems, as
Bescharov and Horowitz outlined. Former Clinton White
House assistant deputy on domestic affairs William Galston
agreed, observing that “much of modern government disemp-
powers through regulation, centralization and the displace-
ment of public power” (1996, p. 59). However, rather than
avoiding government as maximalists suggest, efforts should be
made to improve government. “Properly structured govern-
ment can serve as a positive force for empowerment, it can
nurture mediating institutions; it can foster liberty, rightly
understood” (p. 59). This is part of the paradigm mentioned
earlier.

Galston suggested three “shifts in governance” to better
structure government to “contribute to the cause of individ-
ual and community empowerment” (1996, p. 62) fostered by
mediating structures. These shifts directly address the mini-
malist axioms and the problems they presented.

The first shift involves limiting the government imposed
regulations that so often strangle mediating structures.
Galston, writing in 1996, referred to then Vice-President Al
Gore’s National Performance Review as evidence that this shift
had already begun. The National Performance Review, later
renamed the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR), was a task force created by the Clinton
White House in 1993. The task force was charged “To create
a government that ‘works better, costs less, and gets results
Americans care about’”(GovInfo, 2000). Prior to the Bush
election in 2000 the task force made great efforts to make gov-
ernment more performance and results oriented. This program
represented a start, but it seems clear that government should
be in constant self-analysis mode in an effort to improve ser-
vices and relationships with other entities. Smaller and more
effective government means more power and decision making
ability is transferred to the hands of the people – which will go
a long way in solving Horowitz’s dilemma.

Galston’s second shift in strategy of governance involves
a principle that supporters of mediating structures have been
long clamored for. Galston hearkened back to the New Deal
when the federal government centralized social welfare. This
process must be reversed. Galston called it a “revitalized fed-
eralism”, citing the Clinton administration’s offer of waivers

of certain regulations to states that pursued welfare reform
ideas (1996, p. 63). In the past such a call for an aggressive
return to federalism has come primarily from the Right.
Recently however all sides of the political arena have begun
to see the effectiveness of putting control back into local
hands. Local leaders have greater knowledge of what the
problems are, and what resources are available; much better
than does a federal agency. Ideally federal funds would be
channeled to mediating structures through the local govern-
ment. This may be the answer to Bescharov’s first minimalist
axiom about creating the wrong winners and losers. Local
governments are in a much better position to listen to the
consumers and in turn find the best providers.

“The relationship between government and the institu-
tions of civil society must be reordered” (Galston, 1996, p.
63). Galston’s third shift is perhaps the most directly related
to our funding debate. “In some limited circumstances, gov-
ernment can act directly to invigorate local groups” (p. 63).
Easing regulations and empowering local entities (rather than
the federal government) are both fine ways to invigorate local
groups. However, as was mentioned before, the number one
reason faith-based organizations and other mediating struc-
tures do not play a bigger role in the social welfare system is
due to a lack of funding. Staff members, materials, and build-
ings all cost money. True there are federal and other grants
made available to such organizations, but as was already stat-
ed faith-based organizations are often denied access to these
grants. Why? Because of the very factor that makes them
effective, namely that they are religious! For years govern-
ment has warily eyed relationships with any religion, not
wanting to cross the dangerous line outlined in the First
Amendment. But, as Galston said, if things are to improve
and if mediating structures are to be implemented as public
policy, the relationship between government and these insti-
tutions must be reordered.

This reordering was envisioned by Neuhaus and Berger’s
maximalist approach. They said “our particular contention is
that mediating structures, including religious institutions be
utilized as much as possible as the implementing agencies of
policy goals” (1996, p. 193). Given the positive and empow-
ering effects of mediating structures the authors expected
“increased public funding for the meeting of human needs in
a wide range of policy areas,” (p. 193). Please keep in mind
that this article was originally published nearly 30 years ago!
One must question what has been done since then to imple-
ment mediating structures as the principal agents of social
public policy.

Faith-Based and Community Initiatives
President Bush’s Faith-Based and Community Initiatives
(FBCI) program is perhaps the most recent step in an effort to
implement mediating structures as public policy. FBCI, cre-
ated by executive order, is the embodiment of President
Bush’s vision of a “faith-friendly public square where faith-
based and community organizations can compete equally with other groups to provide government or privately-funded services” (White House, 2005b).

Central to President Bush’s initiative is that religious organizations should not have to give up their religious identity in order to receive federal funds. The President supported legislation to “prevent discrimination against faith-based organizations, protect the religious freedoms of beneficiaries, and preserve religious hiring rights” (White House, 2005). Besides making efforts to eliminate strangling federal barriers to allow mediating structures better access to public funds, the White House is also working with Congress to encourage faith-based organizations. These efforts are touted by members of the administration as ‘leveling the playing field’ allowing all organizations, faith-based and otherwise, to compete for federal funds.

Have these efforts been successful? Are more faith-based organizations receiving federal funding? According to numbers released by the White House it would appear that, at least in the short run, it has been successful. As a result of attempting to level the playing field there was a 20% increase from 2003 to 2004 in the number of first-time faith-based organizations that received federal grants (White House, 2005a). The Department of Health and Human Services “saw an 88% increase in the number of awards to faith-based organizations since FY 2002 – from 483 to 908” (White House, 2005a). These numbers obviously represent a significant move toward employing mediating structures as social policy. FBCI seems to be a start for Neuhaus and Berger’s vision of mediating structures. “We are convinced,” they wrote, “that mediating structures might be the agencies for a new empowerment of people in America’s renewed experiment in democratic pluralism” (Neuhaus & Berger, 1996, p. 208).

**CONCLUSION**

So is that it? Can and should we accept President Bush’s plan as full implementation of mediating structures and be done with the whole matter? Only time can tell, but we can definitively use it as springboard to launch a new era where mediating structures play a larger role in the public arena.

John Winthrop’s invaluable vision of making others conditions our own can only come to fruition if we as individuals and communities are empowered to do so. Huge government programs and massive bureaucracies do not empower nor encourage people to participate in and care for their local community. Feelings of trust, cooperation, common vision, and rallying together to defend common values and traditions empower everyday citizens. These aspects of social capital are developed with others through mediating structures; i.e. family, neighborhood, church, and voluntary associations. These institutions are at the base of our society and ought not be disenfranchised as the main forces of creating and maintaining social norms as well as administering help to those in need. We can only make others conditions our own if we are exposed to and see those conditions, and mediating structures, particularly faith-based organizations provide a helpful forum to do so. Mediating structures are not the end-all, be-all to welfare reform and public policy. They do, however, provide a starting point. Further studies to determine their effectiveness should be done, specifically comparing faith-based organizations and their success rate versus government run welfare agencies and programs.

It is clear that mediating structures are a force already at work in American democracy. The social capital that they create and sustain is priceless in strengthening our relations, communities, and democracy. Mediating structures, specifically faith-based organizations, merit closer consideration and further implementation as instruments of public policy.

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