

Promoting The General Welfare: Preaching vs. Policy

By Roland F. Moy



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As a life long singer he continues a century-long family tradition and has been active with the local Arts Council over a 38 year period, organizing and producing musical shows to raise funds for music scholarships, and producing annual singing events to support Christmas charity funding.

Since joining the Torch Club in Boone, NC in 2007 Moy has developed several papers that apply a core political science concern about abuse of power to the related field of economics, one of which follows. "Promoting the General Welfare" was presented at the Boone Club on May 9, 2016.

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It is seventy-seven years since the 1941 State of the Union address introduced a pivotal understanding of the four human freedoms fundamental for American democracy: freedom of speech and expression; freedom of worship; freedom from want; and freedom from fear. These many years later, we are still confronted with issues involving all four, but this paper focuses on concurrent developments of opposing sides of the question whether "freedom from want" is an appropriate governmental undertaking in pursuit of the constitutional mandate "to promote the general welfare."

To help cope with the deprivations of the Great Depression, the New Deal of the Franklin Roosevelt administration undertook many policy initiatives, including the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, huge dam building projects, the Rural Electrification Administration, and the beginning of the Social Security system, as well as passing legislation that supported labor unions, a minimum wage, and the abolition of child labor. These programs all helped to make "freedom from want" a lived reality.

They also, however, prompted initiatives by opponents of New Deal "pagan statism" to promote Christian libertarian views: a 20-year push beginning in 1935 to place "under God" in the pledge, a call for a national day of prayer, and a proposal to place "In God We Trust" on postage and currency (Kruse). (Still undefined to the present day is whether the mentioned God is generic, in violation of the First Commandment, or an established specific God, in violation of the First Amendment.) By the 1950s, this deliberate injection of religion into government and politics helped to set the stage for continuing political confrontation about which is likelier to bring about improvement in the day-to-day lives of people struggling to make ends meet and to advance their children's future: preaching about character flaws or actual policy initiatives.

Subsequent Developments

Through the nineteen-forties, -fifties, and -sixties, additional federal government policies helped improve life chances and economic growth for all citizens by providing resources that broadened freedom to choose and enjoy a life path. These included the GI Bill, which supported education and home buying; defense budget

spending that boosted jet engine development and a new generation of airplanes and air travel; huge expenditures to undertake building of the Interstate Highway system; massive investment in NASA and the science of the space program (with its spillover benefits [Myhrvold]) to be the first to put a man on the moon and return safely; and the establishment of Medicare, Medicaid, and the Food Stamp program as part of the war on poverty.

Meanwhile the libertarian/conservative ranks were busy publishing such attacks on big government as *The Road To Serfdom* (1944) by Friedrich von Hayek, establishing the *National Review* in the 1950s as a major journal of conservative opinion, and in 1960 producing *The Sharon Statement* (*Sharon Statement*), which defined liberty as an absolute concept and viewed government regulation of economic liberty and tax revenue spent on purposes other than security needs as somehow a moral challenge to the truths (facts) about God's will, and in violation of a sanctified American Constitution. Little known outside conservative circles, the *Sharon Statement* was influential within them.

These libertarian/conservative views led to the nomination of Barry Goldwater at the 1964 Republican convention and have guided the Republican talking points sermon of "small government, low taxes, and individual responsibility" to the present day.

Conservative opposition to New Deal policy trends became more

focused in a then-secret memo of September 1971, addressed to the national Chamber Of Commerce by former tobacco company attorney and future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell. The memo called for conservative business interests, led by the Chamber, to commit resources to influence government policy, elections, public opinion, and the courts (Lewis Powell Memo). An explosion of well-funded conservative opinion "think tanks," lobbying groups, and political action committees soon followed.

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Libertarians organized the Federalist Society to promote conservative legal thought within law schools and legal brief arguments. In the spirit of the *Sharon Statement*, the Federalist Society asserted inalienable property and contract rights that would reinstate the Supreme Court ruling standard of the 1905 *Lochner v. New York* case, thereby prohibiting or calling into question

government protections for labor unions, minimum wages, food safety, child labor, environmental standards, and equal rights for women (Beutler; Lazarus). Conservative columnist George Will would have Republican presidents ask of future court nominees whether they would support the natural rights tradition of economic liberty established by the *Lochner* decision instead of the "disreputable reasons" used to justify federal government policies from the New Deal forward (Will). Might the Republican push to Make America Great Again, therefore, entail a return to the policy patterns and standards that prevailed in the era of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover?

An alternate Christian perspective on the appropriate policy intersection of justice, the government, and the economy was detailed in the 2015 encyclical by Pope Francis on ecology and poverty (*Laudato si'*), which was referenced in his speech later that year to the U.S. Congress, much to the dismay, ironically, of many publically Christian Republicans, who would just as soon ignore the pope's call for government policy action to address economic injustice, poverty, and global warming.

Character vs. Circumstance

Birthplace should not equal destiny in the American Dream (Chetty), but where one lives has a lot to do with one's chances for a good life. Research finds an important link between ZIP code and longevity: "Longevity

increased across the board in the United States between 1963 and the early 1980s, but then stagnated or dropped in disadvantaged counties, according to a 2008 study published by researchers at Harvard University” (Rimler). The report goes on to note that in Baltimore, life expectancy for babies born in wealthier and poorer neighborhoods can vary from 82 to 65 years. Another report notes that when poor people live in cities that spend resources on programs such as safe areas to exercise (e.g., parks and bike lanes), wellness programs, education about smoking and nutrition, health clinics in poorer neighborhoods that provide vaccinations and mammograms, and mental health services to treat depression and “toxic stress,” then healthy behaviors are encouraged that increase longevity (Goldberg). These data reveal that the widening inequality that has occurred since the 1980s has had a negative impact on life expectancy for those at the bottom end of the income scale, and that policy interventions can help to offset some of these negative outcomes.

Other research suggests that moving to a better neighborhood can improve life chances for children in a linear fashion, with those moving at a younger age obtaining the most benefit in terms of long-term educational achievement and adult income earning (Leonhardt). However, such moves often depend on the availability of vouchers to help with costs of relocating, which tend to be well beyond the capabilities of families facing food insecurity. Obligations arising from the growing number of multi-

generational families created by declining income and housing opportunities may be yet another obstacle to moving (Dayen). Relocation can benefit the fortunate few, but leaves unresolved the negative circumstances for the many who remain in underserved and depressed neighborhoods.

Did the millions who fell into poverty after the economic crash of 2008 do so because of their own poor choices and moral collapse?

The conservative solution for the poor living in depressed areas, as stated in a 2016 article in *National Review*, is to rent a U-Haul and move. They should reject “the welfare dependency, the drug and alcohol addiction, the family anarchy” because “nobody did this to them. They failed themselves” (Williamson). FOX News celebrity Bill O’Reilly presaged these comments in 2014, stating that “true poverty is being driven by personal behavior,” including “addictive behavior, laziness, apathy” (Blow). What the poor need, this view suggests,

is more effective preaching to overcome the character deficiencies that are holding back the poor from achieving their full potential. But, we should ask, did preaching effectiveness decline from the 1980s until today? Can character flaws be targeted by ZIP codes around the country, and does changing location change character? Did the millions who fell into poverty after the economic crash of 2008 do so because of their own poor choices and moral collapse?

The neighborhood evidence points more clearly to the conclusion that the limitation on choices from the uneven distribution of resources over geography accounts for more of the difference between the lives of the prosperous and those of the poor. Righteous exhortation, which is never in short supply, can always play a role in the lives of the poor, but the data seem to show that economic trends and deliberate identifiable policy initiatives have a stronger impact on the measurable mobility results that are observed (Levitz; Kristof, “Bad Choices”).

Charity vs. Government Programs

The relative roles of public assistance and private charity have been a long-standing point of contention between left and right. Illumination on this tradeoff might be garnered by examining food security in the United States in recent years. As of 2014, some 46 million Americans received food stamps, 6.4 million children and two million women received supplemental nutrition in the

WIC program, and 30.7 million participated in the National School Lunch Program, with a total food program budget of \$105 billion (Lubrano; “Hunger in America”). Meanwhile the largest food charity, the Feeding America network of food banks and backpack programs, distributes \$5 billion of food and funding to the hungry each year. Other charitable assistance efforts operate with much smaller budgets. These data also reveal that although U.S. philanthropy totals \$300 billion annually, about a third of this total goes to support churches and most of the rest supports universities, hospitals, and cultural institutions such as museums. These donations amounted to about 2% of GDP over the past 40 years and did not vary upward with the Bush tax cuts of the early 2000s. But with the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, charitable giving fell 7% that year and another 6.2% in 2009 (Weissmann). Federal safety net programs, however, surged after the crash from 0.1% of GDP to 2.2% of GDP (at the level of total private philanthropy) thereby acting as automatic stabilizers for the loss of consumer spending that accounts for 70% of GDP.

The federal budget is not at all like a household budget, for which bad times mean belt-tightening. To promote national economic health, the federal budget should respond counter-cyclically to downward trends (exactly the times private charity tends to pull back). Because federal nutrition programs offer rapid scalability along with uniform screening standards, they can do the heavy lifting, while

the private charities can do what they do best as part of a public-private partnership: serve as first responders in emergencies and fill the gaps, rescue food that would be wasted, provide neighbor-to-neighbor contact in time of need, and follow up with rehabilitation and development assistance for broader poverty related issues (Miner).

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Charitable giving by the upper income levels is annually \$100 billion short of the amount needed to cover the relatively narrow needs of food security. And we should note that on this topic, too, we have had plenty of preaching. From Old Testament times onward, the call has gone out that rulers and governments provide justice for the poor.

War On Poverty

If poverty was 15% in the 1960s when the war on poverty was begun, why, fifty years later,

is poverty still 15%? “These programs are failures and should be ended,” is the commonly repeated conservative refrain. Context might shed some light.

In the 1960s, the largest American employer was General Motors, with union wages several times the minimum wage, a good health care package, and a now rare defined benefit pension plan that provided a secure retirement. Today the largest American employer is an anti-union retail business that offers hundreds of thousands of its employees no more than near minimum wage employment that leaves them eligible for safety net programs like food stamps and Medicaid. For retirement, you are on your own. Without the safety net subsidy for this and many other businesses paying poverty wages, the poverty rate would be closer to 25%.

The impoverishment of the American worker can be traced over the past 35 years, during which the top 10% gained 100% of income growth while the bottom 90% on average gained nothing (Warren). The bottom two quintiles have suffered a decline in household income from 2000 to 2016 (Mislinski). The resulting poverty level wages today cost federal and state taxpayers \$153 billion every year, with 56% of public assistance programs going to working families (Public Affairs). Such assistance does not end poverty, but it helps provide enough.

Recent Republican proposals to place safety net programs into block

grants to the states would produce at least four negative results. First, this step would end automatic scalability to counter economic downturns. Second, it would place the programs in jeopardy from state governments, which have a record of shuffling grant funds away from original purposes while displaying a lack of concern for poverty stricken neighborhoods, as in the Flint, Michigan case. Third, it would end automatic easy inflation adjustment and, therefore, fourth, allow the programs to sink toward near starvation levels while requiring shortened eligibility time frames. The resulting reduction in those receiving assistance would produce the false impression that withholding services from the poor is appropriate policy for “solving” the poverty issue as measured by reduced spending. Such a block grant policy would appear to be a clear moral challenge to the Christian faith standards that Republicans actively proclaim, while ignoring the message delivered by the Pope to the Congress in the fall of 2015. It prompts the questions “which God might Republicans be under?” or “Should the Lord’s Prayer should be changed to ‘Give *me* this day *my* daily bread’?”

Adequate safety net funding and living wage levels should be viable options for the richest country in the world, as several cities and states are demonstrating, unless they are overruled by a newly organized Supreme Court applying the 1905 *Lochner* libertarian interpretation of individual liberty and unenumerated rights. In that case, the American Dream may

turn out to be one that is broadly available only while sleeping.

Poverty, Inequality, Mobility, Growth

According to conservative commentators, these issues are matters of personal responsibility, unaffected by actual circumstance. Any reference to conditions is dismissed as a claim of victimhood, or class envy, or placing of blame. No additional spending or programs are needed. Instead, poverty, dependency, and inequality should be reduced by preaching self-sufficiency, which is improved by an increase in work and a healthy marriage, thereby enhancing a sense of self-achievement, well-being, and adult happiness (Rector). Examples are provided of persons successfully emerging from an impoverished background, or individuals developing a new product or application in their garage and promoting it to great success and wealth. Such examples, however, typically run afoul of “survivor bias” (Shermer); they are anecdotes relying on post hoc analysis that identifies the equivalent of the lottery winner. For every Steve Jobs, there are many who are left behind with a cluttered garage, or left to struggle in a bad neighborhood with economic stress. And increases in work or income and healthy marriages are themselves outcomes shaped by a variety of background factors such as overall economic growth, leverage from unions or minimum wage laws to boost income, and an available pool of marriage partners that is often diminished by a combination of economic

insecurity in a context of scarce and low income employment opportunities, or by a criminal justice system skewed by, among other factors, discriminatory drug laws and the criminalization of untreated mental illness.

Policy presages preaching possibilities. Social and economic policy must deal with the probability that changes in identifiable conditions will leverage life chances for large segments of the population who will then have the resources to support the good choices being preached to the less fortunate. These policies should not be sidelined by ideologically exacerbated stereotypes about the “culture of poverty” (Gorski). Nor can they be replaced by the options available to the one per cent, such as Donald Trump borrowing \$1 million from his father or Mitt Romney advising college students to get low cost loans from their parents. Research indicates at least three causal pathways by which inequality limits opportunity and economic mobility: it increases residential segregation by income producing high-poverty neighborhoods; it leads to unequal access to quality education throughout a child’s lifetime; and it undermines opportunity by limiting enrichment goods and social networks for children while exposing them to toxic stress that can hamper brain development and long term academic, health, and economic outcomes (Bernstein). Poorer neighborhoods are also likely to have higher exposures to toxic substances and chemicals such as lead paint, mercury, PCBs, and toxic flame-retardants

that produce lifelong negative consequences for both fetuses and children (Kristof).

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “The evidence shows that high inequality is bad for growth. The case for policy action is as much economic as social. By not addressing inequality, governments are cutting into the social fabric of their countries and hurting their long-term economic growth” (OECD). This would be especially important for the United States economy, in which 70% of GDP is based upon consumer spending, mostly spent by the bottom 90%, which, as noted above, has experienced no overall income growth for the past 35 years, with a 16 year decline for the bottom 40%.

Conclusion

Research shows that policy initiatives can improve “freedom from want” for millions of people while also boosting the overall economy. Over the years, the major policies that have leveraged the life chances of those in the bottom half of the economy have included universal and inexpensive public education through an increasing age range up and down; minimum wage mandates; workplace standards, including ease of unionization; infrastructure expansion and science support; and improved public health and longevity from better standards and broader health care access. Once programs are in place, a little preaching can help out along the way.

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