



## Can Religious Charities Take the Place of the Welfare State?

*Supporters of Trump's budget are eager to restore the central role of faith-based organizations in serving the poor—but it's not clear they can be an adequate substitute for government.*

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President Trump's initial budget proposal would end aid for poor families to pay their heating bills, defund after-school programs at public schools, and make fewer grants available to college students. Community block grants that provide disaster relief, aid neighborhoods affected by foreclosure, and help rural communities access water, sewer systems, and safe housing would be eliminated. Mick Mulvaney, the director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, suggested recently that even small amounts of federal funding for programs like Meals on Wheels, which delivers food to house-bound seniors, may not be justified.

With billions of dollars worth of cuts to federal social services likely ahead, the wars of religion have begun. Bible verses about poverty have suddenly become popular on Twitter, with Republicans and Democrats each claiming to better know how Jesus would think about entitlement spending. While conservatives tend to bring religion into public-policy conversations more than liberals, the valence is often switched when it comes to the budget: Liberals eagerly quote the Sermon on the Mount in support of government spending, while conservatives bristle at the suggestion that good Christians would never want cuts.

But it's more than posturing. If government steps back, religious organizations may need to step up. Much of the infrastructure and money involved in the charitable provision of social services is associated with religion, whether it's a synagogue's homeless-sheltering program or a large aid organization such as Catholic Relief Services. People like the Cato Institute's Michael Tanner believe these private services could potentially be expanded even further. While some government programs should be scrapped altogether, he argued, "other programs may well be replaceable by private charity—either dollar-for-dollar, or more likely, they can be done more effectively and efficiently."

I spoke with roughly a half dozen scholars from a variety of ideological backgrounds who study religious giving, and they were all skeptical that churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith-based organizations could serve as an adequate substitute for the government in providing for the needy and vulnerable. The scale and structure of government services, the sectarian nature of religious programs, and the declining role of religion in public life are all challenges, they argued; if anything, states would have to step in to take on the burden, or some current services would go away entirely. The budget debate may seem like a wonky back-and-forth about economic forecasts. But it probes long-standing questions about how society should provide for people's needs. As David Campbell, a political-science professor at the University of Notre Dame, put it, "No religion is on the sidelines when it comes to caring for the poor."

People's views on budget questions are often determined by their political beliefs, said Campbell. Whether they're Republicans or Democrats, "religious people across the spectrum would agree the poor need to be helped." The question is who should do the helping, and how much government should be involved.

In their private lives, religious Americans are extremely generous. According to the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at Indiana University, donations to congregations, denominations, mission board, and TV and radio ministries account for roughly one-third of all annual giving in the U.S. The impact of this money is difficult to calculate, but it's large: In 2001, the University of Pennsylvania professor Ram Cnaan tried to tally the financial value of all congregational social services in Philadelphia, estimating that it added up to roughly \$247 million. When all social-service organizations with a religious mission are taken into account, the value of those services in many communities would likely be much higher.

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These services aren't exactly private, however. According to Oklahoma Representative Steve Russell, who testified on religious-freedom issues before Congress last spring, more than 2,000 federal contracts are awarded to religious organizations each year. If programs like the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grants are cut, as Trump has proposed, many religious organizations would lose major parts of their operating budgets. This kind of federal-spending cut can have tangible consequences: World Relief, an evangelical organization that works with the federal government on refugee resettlement, cut 140 staffers and closed five offices earlier this year when the Trump administration announced a sharp decrease in the number of refugees that will be accepted into the United States.

A lot of religious giving also doesn't go toward helping the needy. "The vast majority of religious congregation budget [money] is spent on in-house expenses: clergy, building, materials," said Christian Smith, a sociology professor at the University of Notre Dame. "Some congregations have more outreach ministry and social services than others. But in almost all cases, it ends up being a small part of the budget, just because it costs so much to run a congregation."

Using a national survey of religious congregations in the U.S., the Duke Divinity School professor Mark Chaves found that 83 percent of congregations have some sort of program to help needy people in their communities. Most often, these efforts provide clothing, food, and temporary shelter, rather than intensive, long-term programs on substance abuse, post-prison rehabilitation, or immigrant resettlement. The median amount congregations spent on social-service programs was \$1,500. “Religious congregations do a lot,” said Mary Jo Bane, a professor at Harvard University. But “the scale of what they do is trivial compared to what the government does. Especially if you think about the big government programs like ... food stamps and school lunches, or health services through Medicaid, what religious organizations do is teeny tiny.”

If large-scale cuts to domestic social services do make it through the long budget-negotiation process, “there’s an argument to be made [that] ... churches, synagogues, etc., might step up,” said Lisa Keister, a professor of sociology at Duke University. Keister has argued that religious engagement is closely associated with financial generosity—in a recent paper, for example, she found that those who attend religious services every week give nearly three times as much as those who don’t.

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People of all religious backgrounds are generous, but the style of giving differs by faith and denomination. For example: “Jewish families ... tend to be wildly generous,” said Keister. Many conservative Christians tithe 10 percent or more of their income, she said, often giving to their churches, which leaves them with less accumulated wealth. Mormons provide a complex array of social services to people in need, but mostly focus on their own members, said Smith. And Catholics and mainline Protestants are less likely to proselytize while helping others: “Mainline Protestants wouldn’t know how to ‘share the gospel’ if their life depended on it,” he said. “They’re just going to help people, and in their mind, they’re doing it in Jesus’s name.”

For some groups, though, proselytizing may be part and parcel of how they reach out to the needy. Liberals often cite this as a reason why the government should provide social services: In the absence of federal funding, people seeking things like education and housing may be left without a non-sectarian alternative. Tanner waved this concern away, though. “If someone has to listen to preaching to get free food—is it less than optimal? Sure,” he said. “But it’s probably not the thing I’m most worried about.”

Americans’ declining level of religious involvement may also cripple institutions’ ability to provide wide-scale services to vulnerable populations. “While I would be hesitant to say that highly secular people are callous, it is the case that religious people, in general, do give more to charitable causes,” said Campbell, and “they are much more likely to give time than money.”

Campbell divided “secular people” into two categories: Those who are “actively secular,” meaning they’ve embraced a secular worldview that involves high levels of political and civic engagement, and the “quintessential nones,” or people who are detached from a wide range of civic, social, and religious institutions. Across demographic groups, and especially among Millennials, that latter group of Americans has been getting bigger. Right now, the government requires them to contribute tax dollars to education, hunger-prevention programs, homelessness services, and more. But, Campbell hypothesized, it’s unlikely that they’d channel that money

through private institutions, religious or otherwise, in a world where Trump's proposed cuts are in place.

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At some level, this is what the debate over federal spending is all about: What should American communities look like, and how directly should they be responsible for providing for the poor and needy? "It's an open question whether the rise of the 'nones' ... will significantly affect religious institutions' ability to be that hub for social engagement," said David King, the director of Indiana's Lake Institute, suggesting that they may grow more involved over time. "I still hold out hope that that's actually quite possible." Especially among Millennials, he said, he has seen evidence that Americans are more willing to get involved in their community through "common work," or direct action on the issues they care about, rather than volunteering with or donating to institutions. As traditional charitable institutions decline, he said, this kind of communal engagement may expand.

For his part, Tanner imagines a world where government no longer crowds out private giving, as he claims it does now. "What's translated as 'charity' in the Bible is 'agape,' which literally means love," he said. "We do have a responsibility to help the poor and those in need. That means taking care of them yourself—giving money yourself, giving your time, your efforts, not someone else's."

There is a long road ahead for Trump's budget. Dismantling the welfare state as thoroughly as he has proposed would be a radical overhaul of the American system. It would shift not just government, but the way organizations that partner with it—including a lot of religious groups—provide services to the poor and vulnerable.