COMPASSIONATE NEOLIBERALISM?:
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY,
THE WELFARE STATE, AND THE
POLITICS OF THE RIGHT

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Faith, Government, and Neoliberalism The study of neoliberalism has
been a popular theme in political science, geography, and sociology for the
past decade. The focus of this vast literature varies considerably, but has
been generally aimed at understanding the ways in which the ideas of mid-
twentieth century neoliberal ideologues like Friedman, Hayek, and von
Mises have been morphed into the actualized policy apparatus at various
scales in different countries.¹ Research projects under this rubric have sought
to explore different dimensions of this process, from the institutions that
promote such ideas, like bond-rating agencies, think tanks, and the IMF, to
the political logics underlying it.² One common focus of these studies is
the decentralizing or dismantling of Keynesian welfare and its replacement
with policies that emphasize markets, individual responsibility, and a dimin-
ished governmental safety net—all of which are key principles of idealized
neoliberalism.³ Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of all sorts have
been called upon in this environment to absorb some of the responsibili-
ties once ensconced in the Keynesian state. Though most religious NGOs
(also referred to in this paper as “faith-based organizations” (FBOs)) have
a complicated set of objectives and processes that predate the rise of neoliberalism, many have been integrated into an effort to reduce reliance on
traditional, Keynesian forms of delivery in the United States and elsewhere.
Such organizations are increasingly called on to deliver Keynesian services
that were rolled-back through cuts.⁴
While there has been an enormous flow of literature on FBOs, very little of this research has considered such organizations within the context of neoliberalizing patterns of service delivery, though some notable and useful exceptions apply. Why would religious NGOs be different than any other welfare-providing NGO in this context? To a certain extent, this question remains unanswered, but religious NGOs possess a degree of legitimacy or bonding social capital that other secular NGOs—organized around social problems rather than identities or religions—often do not have. The role of replacing welfare (once provided by the Keynesian state) becomes considerably more murky for volunteers of religious NGOs that are motivated not necessarily (or often) by a desire to return welfare to charities (as most neoliberals desire), but by a complicated set of personal and spiritual objectives that sometimes intersect with, but often diverge from, this political project. This alone makes the study of FBOs as a subset of other NGOs worthy of study.

One, though not the only, piece of this story is how the evangelical community positions itself around this issue. The evangelical community is composed of a surprisingly wide array (given its popular representations) of political positions, but as a voting bloc has been generally aligned with the Republican Party since 1980. Though it is likely impossible to accurately summarize a singular position that represents all evangelicals, it is useful to survey some of the attempts to formulate such a stance by its own adherents. Understanding their position (or positions) on any matter is almost a necessary condition for understanding the policy landscape that emerges in response. Moreover, while evangelicals and neoliberals are often lumped (or fused) into one conservative whole, their politics, narratives, and tactics are very different, both historically and in the present. Disentangling the voices on the Right around issues of welfare helps to meaningfully parse a putative coalition that is routinely framed a singular, undifferentiated whole. This study explores traces of neoliberalism in evangelical texts in part to analyze the overlaps and departures between these political traditions. The overarching thesis is that while evangelical and neoliberal political traditions have foregrounded FBOs as suitable alternatives to government-run welfare, both have done so without a very sophisticated dialogue on the
range of FBOs that actually exists in the American social assistance landscape. Moreover, a closer examination of the political discourses on the topic reveal substantial philosophical rifts—particularly around the concept of “compassion”\textsuperscript{11}—that call into question the erstwhile fusion of evangelicals and neoliberals, and perhaps point to an opportunity for progressives to politically challenge a coalition that has been responsible for (and largely successful at) assaulting the concept and practice of welfare in the past 40 years.

**Religious NGOs and the State**  Before delving into this larger argument and the nature of evangelical discourses on welfare, it is necessary to situate the conversation on FBOs within the much broader literature on the topic. The typological family of FBOs that emerges from a simple literature review reveals a range of models that spill significantly beyond the bounds of the antistatist, individualist political dialogue offered by either neoliberals or mainstream evangelicals.

This study is organized around a simple typology drawn from the literature on religious NGOs. There has been a great deal of effort in the past decade to provide a better typological understanding of FBOs, particularly in understanding how and when religion is a part of the social services that they provide.\textsuperscript{12} Much, though not all, of this interest was in direct response to the Bush administration’s Faith Based Initiative insofar as there was a heightened need within social science scholarship to learn about the range of institutions and practices that fall under the banner of “faith-based organization.” In very brief form, this literature revealed an incredibly varied landscape of service strategies, political ideals, theological foundations, and institutional makeups. A number of common themes can also be used to structure our understanding of the FBO landscape. FBOs are positioned in at least five ways within this literature: as extensions, enhancements, catalysts, and alternatives (both regressive and progressive) for government-based welfare. The themes found in evangelical texts will be related to, and contrasted with, this reference point later in the paper.

**Religious NGOs-as-extensions** A common theme in the aforementioned FBO literature is the revelation that many religious NGOs engage in social
assistance that is financed by some level of government. Usually, though not always, such contractual work is performed by large denominational groups (rather than congregations) like Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services. Most federal and state contractual agreements in the United States (and in most secular, developed countries for that matter) come with some guidelines on how that money can be used. These often include stipulations requiring the FBO to guarantee that it will not discriminate against those of other faiths in hiring or clientele. In order to comply, intricate efforts have been made to either secularize the operation, or to compartmentalize and separate a branch of the organization that will be dealing with government contracts (from the “sectarian” branches of the organization that might not comply with government regulations). This tends to diminish the openly religious elements of religious NGOs, much to the consternation of conservatives who believe that those elements are integral to the success of the organization. In a sense, then, some FBOs—or at least departments within some FBOs—function as extensions of state-based welfare, committed in general to the same principles of universal access as secular government, and largely dependent on the state for funding. They are, in this view, part of the “shadow state” that has become increasingly relevant as central governments spin off welfare work in the form of contracts to NGOs.

**Religious NGOs-as-enhancements** Not all literature emphasizes the contractual shadow state functions of some religious NGOs. Some authors emphasize the notion that FBOs may depend on government funding because of their fundraising limitations, but are better than the state at providing social services, so they should be given the latitude to use this funding however they wish, sectarian or not. This theme reveals itself in a number of forms. First, there is a variety of literature that emphasizes the role that FBOs have played historically as social service providers before and during the rise of formalized government-funded welfare, and that they should be compensated for their efforts. Such work argues, based on historical work, that religious NGOs have displayed a compassion, possess social capital, and enhance community in ways that government or secular NGO
welfare could not hope to provide. Many authors in this school conclude that this historical experience is a justification for contemporary funding of religious NGOs, but with no (or few) regulatory strings attached. This theme was popular within the Bush Administration, which tried, with mixed success, to increase funding and reduce oversight to small congregational FBOs. A second manifestation of the religious NGO-as-enhancement theme has been in the form of geographical accounts of how such a relationship (between FBO and the state) functions in countries other than the United States. The work of Daly is particularly important in this regard, as he argued that western European countries—particularly the Netherlands and Germany—offer a model in which FBOs are funded without state regulation. A third argument has been made by conservatives who suggest that FBOs are superior to government-run welfare because the FBOs are able to sort the “deserving” from the “undeserving”—thus the FBO-as-enhancement would be not only more just, but also less expensive, in practice, because the “undeserving” would be removed from the care apparatus and members of the public would have better accountability with their tax dollars.

Religious NGOs-as-catalysts for Change Not all authors have understood religious NGOs as either alternatives, extensions, or enhancements of the state. Some authors have focused on the progressive possibilities of FBOs and how, in particular, they can be used as a vehicle to motivate the state to become more redistributive. Pacione, for example, has documented the importance of the Church of England’s “Faith in the City” report in the late 1980s. “Faith in the City” argues for the government to devote more resources to poverty reduction. In a sense, its position is more progressive than the official opposition at the time (though probably no more successful). More recently, Beaumont and Dias have argued that the equation of FBOs as vehicles of neoliberalism is hasty and, in many cases, inaccurate. They show how two Dutch FBOs (one in Rotterdam and one in Amsterdam) provided not only conventional social assistance, but also a vehicle for activism against neoliberal policies by the state. Much of this sentiment implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) harkens back to the ideas of Liberation
Theology and the Social Gospel, some fragments of which have been revived in the form of a “religious Left” that sees it as imperative to use biblical teachings as a justification for challenging the neoliberal state.21 Still others have pointed out how FBOs have been important components—usually, though not exclusively, in conjunction with labour unions in advocating for better working conditions and pay for workers.22

**Religious NGOs-as-alternatives to the State** FBOs are framed as alternatives to the state within the literature, but in at least two forms that are useful to differentiate because they imply (and, in some cases, state directly) a completely different normative policy agenda. In one case, the experience of FBOs could be interpreted as a justification for more state-based or state-sponsored social assistance. In the other, the experience of FBOs is framed as a justification to diminish or completely eradicate state involvement in welfare.

**Type A: As Alternative to the Regressive State**
Some literature focuses on FBOs as alternatives to government, but not part of a normative desire to destroy state-based welfare. Rather, a number of authors have emphasized the role that FBOs—congregations in particular—have played historically (and in a contemporary sense) at providing assistance that the state either could not or would not provide. First, a variety of authors have emphasized the role that FBOs have played historically, before, during, and after the rise of Keynesian welfare in the mid-twentieth century.23 Through individual case studies and meta-analyses, these authors show that FBOs are not positioned necessarily as a reason to provide less government welfare, but rather as a de facto safety net within contexts where regressive politics mobilized statecraft to deny social assistance to the poor. They were an “alternative” because the state would not mobilize its resources to help. A second, less direct strand emphasizes the idea that FBOs possess qualities that the state simply cannot replicate and thus provide services that are incomparable to those provided by the state. Ley and Hays, for example, have shown that FBOs possess a cultural legitimacy among adherents of their religion that can be mobilized to motivate volunteers to help
new immigrants assimilate to a new country, or build houses for the poor.\textsuperscript{24} Although this theme is expressed in varied fragments, the important continuity is that this literature is not directed towards a normative view that would see the reduction or demolition of welfare. These authors express the position that either FBOs have picked up where the state has been negligent, or more directly that FBOs need more, not less, help from the state in their social assistance programs.

\textit{Type B: As Idealized Replacement for the “Failed” State}

The notion of religious NGOs as replacements—defined here as descriptions and practices that frame such organizations as not only better than the state, but also able (or conceivably able with the right policy) to function as independent entities—is less common in the literature, but voiced by a variety of influential pundits. This theme has taken at least two forms in the literature. First, the idea is rooted in the notion that charities of all sorts, religious or not, were “crowded out” by the expansion of government welfare in the 1930s, and remain so today.\textsuperscript{25} Within this logic, the government should radically downsize, if not completely eliminate, welfare so that the charitable sector can be “revived.”\textsuperscript{26} As a large component of the charitable sector, religious NGOs are often framed, by default, as a suitable replacement for welfare in these narratives. Second, this view has been promoted by those who not only have antipathy for government-based welfare, but also believe that the replacement should be religious (not a secular NGO model).\textsuperscript{27} Marvin Olasky is arguably the most prominent promoter of this position.\textsuperscript{28} He has argued that government-based welfare is an abject failure primarily because it is wasteful and does not emphasize personal responsibility enough. To Olasky, such programs should be dismantled and replaced with a locally based religious system funded by biblical tithes. Such programs would not burden the federal government and would be able to sort the so-called deserving from undeserving poor.\textsuperscript{29} Olasky’s views have had wide influence in the US Republican Party; he was a close advisor to George W. Bush in the 1990s and is credited with coining the phrase and selling the concept of “compassionate conservatism.”\textsuperscript{30}
How closely do evangelical texts match any or all of these idealized models as expressed in the literature? Is there an overwhelming emphasis on one model or another? If so, what language and themes are used to express this model? How are they justified, biblically or otherwise? This study explores the framing of welfare in two evangelical texts: National Association of Evangelicals Policy Resolutions and Christianity Today articles on welfare.31

Evangelical Welfare in NAE Policy Resolutions  The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was founded in 1942 in Saint Louis, Missouri, initially with the name National Association of Evangelicals for United Action.32 The group was formed as an umbrella organization for hitherto disparate denominations and groups. The evangelical community had been reluctant to re-enter public policy debates after the Scopes Trial in the 1920s, which marginalized the community as antiscience and culturally backward.33 The NAE has taken on an increasingly public policy focus over the years and has entered into policy debates. As of 2009, the NAE represented more than 60 denominations and 45,000 churches.34 The organization is now based in Washington and serves to advance evangelical interests in the public policy sphere. One of the many vehicles used to advance this agenda is the organization’s “public policy resolutions”—the resolutions have been used in the past to gauge “the” evangelical position on a variety of issues.35 The resolutions are most often generated by staff people at the NAE, but must be voted on by the NAE board during the annual convention. The NAE Board, which meets twice per year, is composed of 125 members, 50 of which are denominational representatives, with the remaining 75 as at-large seats.36 The policy issues covered range from immediate responses, to policy proposals like the Faith Based Initiative, to longer-term concerns like Communism, to issues that transcend any particular policy initiative, such as abortion, AIDS, and the family.37 The resolutions range in size from as brief as 100 words to more than 5,000 words.38 Overall, the attempt is made to summarize and promote a stance held by evangelicals on a particular issue. This process is always complicated and often acrimonious, reflecting the variety of constituencies and organizations under the NAE umbrella. There are 219 resolutions in total, some of which are publicly accessible on
the NAE website, but most of which had to be requested for this study. Slightly more than 40 percent (41.1%) of the resolutions respond directly to some domestic policy, while 20 percent (20.1%) respond to some foreign policy issue from the past 50 years. While all of the resolutions involve a moralizing component, some resolutions (38.8%) are less specific policy critiques than generalized calls to action or general statements on moral issues or life in the church.

The focus of this study is government-based welfare for the poor—a topic that has been sprinkled throughout the policy resolutions over the years. The following steps were taken to complete this analysis. First, all of the resolutions on every topic were read both to gain a sense of context for those on the topic of welfare, and also to unearth threads of the discussion about welfare that may not be obvious from the title of the resolution. As mentioned earlier, most resolutions are available online, but several were requested specially to complete this step. Second, an effort was made to isolate those resolutions that were most pertinent to the conversation on welfare and its provision by the government. There were no resolutions directly on the topic of “welfare,” but dozens that dealt with the topic in one way or the other. These ranged from direct responses to policy programs like Charitable Choice, to important references within longer and more general resolutions, like “Health of a Nation, 2004.”39 To maintain focus, some conversations were eliminated from this analysis—such as the many references to private education, communism, and missionary work overseas—even though one could argue that they had some relevance to the issue at hand. Third, those pertaining to welfare were scrutinized and the following questions asked: What is the evangelical stance on government-based welfare? What, if any, alternatives are proposed? What themes are most salient at guiding an evangelical public policy on welfare?

Though there is no comprehensive NAE summary of what evangelicals oppose or propose for the welfare state, many definitive fragments can be assembled to reveal the basic contours of “evangelical welfare,” at least as it is expressed in NAE resolutions. Overall, there is a recurrent need, in some cases framed as a “biblical mandate,” to provide for the poor, so while references to welfare in NAE documents may have a generally conservative flair,
there is no “not my problem” libertarianism as found in, for example, CATO Institute briefings. An evidently genuine concern and compassion for the poor is expressed in multiple resolutions. Despite this concern, almost no sympathy is expressed in any of the resolutions for government efforts to address it; almost every reference to welfare includes an implied or direct critique of government-based efforts to solve it. “It is a tragic reality of life in the United States,” notes one recent resolution, “that, despite unprecedented economic growth and low unemployment, there remains what appears to be a ‘permanent underclass.’ This reality persists despite billions of dollars and significant efforts spent on anti-poverty programs.”

Government efforts to eradicate poverty are criticized as inefficient, overly bureaucratic, and leading towards dependency. “We have long maintained,” notes one recent resolution, “that many government programs, while meeting immediate needs, actually weaken families, destroy initiative, and trap people in poverty.” Small, balanced-budget government is routinely advocated as the alternative. NAE resolutions outline a system that relies heavily on independent FBOs and the tax policies that might support them, such as more generous charitable giving deduction allowances. Some ambivalence is expressed about the role that government should play in funding such organizations, ranging from vouchers to individuals, to little or no government support, but there is no ambivalence about the appropriate regulatory role: funding or not, there ought to be no regulatory oversight by the federal government in the activities of FBOs, whether that be on the issue of hiring practices, or who it serves, or how it serves them. Not surprisingly, the NAE expressed unambiguous support for the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. As a recent resolution states, “The National Association of Evangelicals supports the concept of Charitable Choice, not only as effective public policy, but as a sound expression of faithful Christian discipleship.” The nature of exactly what this welfare would look like is not covered in great detail in the resolutions, but “individual responsibility” is a recurrent theme. As an early resolution states, “one of the fundamental principles of Christian social welfare is to help people help themselves,” a concern echoed many times, most recently in 2004.
Within these broad contours, more subtle but definitive messages about evangelical welfare are also expressed. These range from where the authority for welfare provision resides, to how evangelicals should understand civil government. These details are expressed repeatedly and with conviction, so they deserve some mention here. There are frequent reminders that the Bible, and the Bible alone, provides the clarity needed to craft an evangelical position on welfare. As the 2004 resolution “For the Health of the Nation,” says:

Every normative vision has some understanding of persons, creation, history, justice, life, family, and peace. As Christians committed to the full authority of Scripture, our normative vision must flow from the Bible and from the moral order that God has embedded in his creation.49

Almost every resolution, no matter what the topic, includes the invocation of a biblical verse to justify the stance. This is, of course, not surprising for an organization whose identity is built at least in part on a strict, if not literal, reading of the Bible. But perhaps more instructive is the fact that there is no evidence of the variation, and indeed dissent within evangelical ranks about what the Bible calls them to do about various policy realms. Rather, as one resolution points out, the effort was to present a unified voice and to elide such variation: “Evangelicals may not always agree about policy, but we realize that we have many callings and commitments in common.”50

A second theme expressed in the NAE resolutions is a profound discomfort with, or distrust of the role of the state. Government at all levels is often described as possessing almost limitless power. Most resolutions that deal with the topic cautiously call for government support for FBOs, but also frame the state as a corrupting omnipresence that will pollute the evangelical message. Recent and past governmental rules that limit resources to FBOs because of their sectarian bent, or those that attach rules to the outlay of resources, are routinely criticized. FBOs are framed as a source of virtue, and government-based welfare as a polluted or misguided project. A corollary to this theme is the almost unambiguous rejection of the notion that FBOs, particularly evangelical FBOs, are simply an extension of the
government when they enter into welfare contracts with it. As one representative resolution puts it:

The church may as an agent administer government assistance without compromise of the principle of the separation of church and state if the church’s policies are not controlled or influenced thereby or vice versa. This may be done in conjunction with the church’s own relief program or as a separate operation. In consideration of the contractual arrangement between the church and government, certain policies may be stipulated and agreed upon, but the choice of the personnel and total administration of the program must be the entire responsibility of the church. *The church cannot become the arm of the government.*

The state is thus a complicated entity within NAE resolutions. On one hand, there is a begrudging acknowledgement that government has a different purpose than the church, and, importantly, has a resource base that could be mobilized for FBOs. On the other hand, the state is routinely cast as a polluting influence. A simple contracting “extension of government” relationship is rejected definitively and repeatedly.

A third theme prevalent in NAE resolutions about welfare is the frequent invocation of biblical mandates and authority, not just for Christians, but for governmental officials and government in general. “Be it resolved,” says a 1980 resolution, “that the National Association of Evangelicals urges Christians to pray for those in authority, and to remind them that their power is ordained of [God] and they are responsible to Him.” “We affirm,” notes another, “that government is a God-ordained entity, responsible for the advancement of good and the inhibition of evil in our world.” It is not surprising, again given the identity of evangelicals, that biblical verses are invoked as sources of credibility for Christians. But the resolutions extend this legitimacy to broader government in general. This is interesting, not least because it sheds some doubt on the narrative that evangelical welfare is politically mainstream, or at least so varied that it is impossible to label. These invocations of biblical authority could be easily deemed “Dominionist” in character. Dominionism is the highly controversial thought that Christians are effectively mandated to assume control over the levers of government and
are responsible to the Bible, not the Constitution. Many commentators on the Right have scathingly rejected the idea that conservative welfare policies, or any government policies for that matter, are motivated by such influences. It is perhaps for this reason that one recent resolution softens this point somewhat by more carefully delineating a role for government that is separate from the church: “there are scriptural warrants for the instituting of civil government and for the ordaining of the Church, that each has its distinct sphere of operation.” But by and large, this sentiment is definitively overshadowed by the many references to biblical authority over government, no matter who is in charge or what welfare program they are administering.

Evangelical Welfare in *Christianity Today* The magazine *Christianity Today* is one of the most widely read evangelical magazines in the United States, boasting a circulation of 140,000 and a readership of 290,000. It was founded in October 1956 by Billy Graham in an attempt to bring together the various denominational and congregational elements of evangelical Christians. Graham wanted to create a “theologically conservative but socially liberal” forum to compete with the highly successful *Christian Century*, a mainline Protestant publication popular in the 1950s. Today’s *Christianity Today* is available online and in print. The magazine features a variety of material, ranging from op-eds to short articles and longer pieces. Current events dictate much of the subject matter, but unlike its secular counterparts, such news is often linked to biblical verses and themes by its writers. Unlike the NAE policy resolutions, *Christianity Today* is not in the business of unifying the evangelical community around short, coherent statements. It reports on the breadth of the community, so there is considerable variation in viewpoints expressed and in how they are justified. That said, it tends to be considered politically moderate compared to other evangelical magazines and periodicals. It is precisely for this mainstream quality that this magazine was chosen over other possibilities. Unlike the NAE resolutions, *Christianity Today* articles are very example-based, offering a rich template from which to generalize about what is the normative ideal for evangelical welfare.
For this study, a variety of articles from *Christianity Today* were clipped and inserted into a database. Specifically, the database included all articles featuring the words “welfare,” “charitable choice,” “social assistance,” and “faith based initiative.” Articles with references to “government,” “taxes,” “poverty,” “regulation,” and “economic policy” were also included, but thinned considerably to retain a focus on social assistance. The database, dating to the 1956 beginning of the publication, yielded an initial size of 373 articles. Each article was then read for content, and a coding scheme was developed to better understand the way that government-based welfare was framed and how, if at all, evangelical alternatives were positioned. Generally, the intent was to count and analyze the articles to address the following questions. How are governmental welfare efforts categorized? Are they routinely pejorative, positive, or ambivalent? What words are frequently used to describe them? Next, an effort was made to analyze the specific examples of “evangelical welfare.” Of the 373 initial articles on the topic, 92 featured a description of an evangelical NGO involved in social assistance work, or abstractly referred to an idealized relationship between FBOs and the state. Special attention was paid to these articles; in particular, how are evangelical alternatives positioned in these articles, and how do these framings compare to the typological family of religious NGOs discussed above? Specifically, there was an effort to identify whether the evangelical alternative was being cast as a replacement, alternative, catalyst, enhancement, or extension of government efforts.

Overall, articles on welfare were sporadic, often occurring around seminal events like the 1960s Great Society programs, Welfare Reform in the 1990s, or Hurricane Katrina in 2005. There was a great deal of variation in tone, style, length, and substance. Some articles were more philosophical in nature, some more descriptive. There is no singular “evangelical position” regarding social assistance that can be gleaned from these articles, but a number of qualitative and quantitative observations are possible. First, there is a notable recurrence of a larger tension between individualism and compassion that reveals itself in these articles and that distinguishes evangelical voices from more puritanically neoliberal ones. Both sentiments—personal responsibility and compassion—are put forth as biblical mandates, so it is not a
simple matter to resolve them. Simply stating that individuals should fend for themselves seems to violate the ethic of compassion, while arguing that the state should provide for them seems to violate the ethic of individualism. The most common resolution to this ethical quandary was to begrudgingly acknowledge the necessity of the state for resource purposes, but to aggressively promote evangelical alternatives to government welfare. These articles took the form of both descriptions of evangelical charities that were receiving government money, and more philosophical editorials that staked out a more general position. In most articles, the prescribed model was of autonomous evangelical FBOs receiving state money, but with no oversight on how they performed their services, who they hired, or who they served (or refused to serve).

In a more limited number of cases, the ethic of compassion led some to conclude that the state would be a far more effective vehicle for promoting evangelical interests (namely compassion for the poor) than small religious NGOs. In the magazine's first article on the topic, for example, Joseph Dawson pens a stirring defence of democratic compassionate welfare state government on biblical grounds. Dawson’s analysis portrays an almost Keynesian God and a manifestly Keynesian agenda for evangelicals:

Translated into particulars, governmental extension of love might cover social security, retirement benefits, assistant to the unemployed, aged and disabled, funds for veterans, housing, public health and care of the sick and mentally ill, soil conservation, agricultural subsidies, restraint of monopolies, regulation of public carriers, free education and the many other benefits.62

It is clear that Dawson sees evangelical efforts as different from those of government, and that, if anything, Christians should support such efforts. But the response to this article and sentiment was overwhelmingly negative. In one of the many angry replies to Dawson's essay, the famously-libertarian evangelical Howard Kershner wrote succinctly in a response letter that “We believe in extending Christian love, but we do not believe it can be done by the state. It can and should be done by individuals.”63

The sentiment of antigovernment individualism dramatically outweighed the quasi-Keynesian sentiments expressed by Dawson, or implied by others.
The casual assumption in most news articles and the overwhelming percentage of opinion pieces casts FBOs as either replacements for, or enhancements of government-based welfare.

As mentioned earlier, 92 articles provided a codeable opportunity to assess how evangelical FBOs were being framed. There are no instances of such organizations serving as catalysts for progressive policy or extensions of the state through contractual relationships. There are also no instances in which such organizations are framed as doing the work that the state refused to do. FBOs-as-replacements and FBOs-as-enhancements are the only two motifs that match the typology discussed earlier. FBOs-as-replacements (30.4%) are not as common as FBOs-as-enhancements (69.6%), but where the FBO-as-replacement motif is expressed, it is expressed with passion. As one columnist pushing this perspective notes:

The solution to the U.S. welfare-poverty crisis is to bring private initiative into partnership with government. One idea for privatizing public charity would allow individual taxpayers rather than politicians and bureaucrats to decide how a portion of welfare dollars is spent. A system would be set up by which individuals would allocate their tax dollars to a qualified charity, public or private. In this way, public and private charities would compete.64

For those advocating the FBO-as-replacement model, direct subsidies through donations (that would be loosened by lowering taxes) was the most common funding approach. But many questioned this approach, especially those on the ground in actual FBOs, not least, as Wilson points out, “because income from the private sector is too sporadic to provide for people on a sustaining basis.”65 Primarily, though not exclusively for this reason, most articles frame the normative ideal as FBOs-as-enhancements—dependent on a sustainable stream of funds from government, but able to do as they please, serve (and deny) whomever they choose, and hire whom they wish without government interference. The obvious message of this framing is that, yes, government welfare is a bad thing, but we need its money and have a solution that is better. Framing of this sort took several forms. First and most common are the various vignettes and features on actual FBOs, like Richmond Virginia’s Strategies to Elevate People (STEP) program, which mentored
former welfare recipients in their efforts to escape poverty, or Lansing's Love in the Name of Christ (Love INC), which links people in need with Churches. Government relationships—usually through funding—were duly acknowledged in such articles, but the FBOs in question were contrasted sharply with specific and hypothetical government-led efforts.

A number of qualitative themes in these discussions are also worthy of note. First, there is an interesting tension between compassion for those in need of welfare and judgment for how they got there. Arguably, this tension is derived from the larger division within the evangelical community of whether to accept the socializing principles of the Social Gospel, or the extreme individualism of ideas like Reconstructionism. This tension is expressed most fully in the 1981 article covering famous evangelical commentators Ronald Sider and Gary North. Sider, known for arguing that government should ally with the Church, and North, known for being an extreme Reconstructionist who doubts the authority of secular government to exist at all, are featured in this article. Fragments of this tension reveal themselves throughout the 50-year discussion of welfare covered in this magazine. Philosophical statements suggesting that there is biblical authority for democratic, even secular government that provides aid for the poor are definitely to be found, as are the even greater number that argue that FBOs should be paid by the government to provide welfare. But these instances are always countered—sometimes through letters to the editor, sometimes through other articles, sometimes in the same article—by the highly individualized, welfare-less state model for which the Religious Right (and neoliberals) have become famous. While it would be misleading to suggest that a singular position on welfare is being expressed in the pages of Christianity Today, it would also be misleading to suggest that articles expressing sympathy for government, or even government funding, are met with wide acceptance in those same pages. Most articles, while self-consciously grappling with their biblically mandated responsibility to be compassionate to the poor, are also quite antistatist in general, and almost completely anti (secular or government) welfare in particular.

This stance, when combined with the very present expressions of compassion for the poor, created a quandary for many authors. How, in particular,
if evangelicals have the baggage of compassion, are they to adopt a position that is self-consciously devoid of it (i.e., neoliberalism)? Many authors in this sample resolved this conflict through an appeal for paternalism towards the poor. In one memorable example, Amy Sherman, a Manhattan Institute fellow, explains why many evangelicals struggle with welfare reform. As it began by laying the groundwork for denying those in need of welfare benefits, Sherman points out that some evangelicals “worried that it might be a case of weaning the baby off the bottle a little too quickly.” The parental metaphors do not stop there. She goes on to celebrate Christian alternatives, like a Mississippi program for churches to “adopt” former welfare recipients, and writes child-like caricatures of former recipients who were finally relieved of their irresponsible ways. Although this is one of the more direct instances of paternalism, this theme recurs throughout the dataset. It manifests itself in more subtle ways as well. There are numerous vignettes about the personal failings of welfare recipients of their “unwillingness” (rather than inability) to find work, or of their “shady” pasts. Though these portrayals are often followed by expressions of sympathy, there is a marked inclination towards emphasizing the individual causes of poverty in most articles. Second, the nature of many evangelical alternatives also expresses a subtle form of paternalism. In a 1994 article, Tapia discusses a program called “urban relocators,” which involves (mostly white) evangelicals moving to inner-city communities in an effort to stabilize neighbourhoods through their outreach. “We feel that moving to the inner city is a tangible expression of God’s kingdom,” notes one volunteer. “The presence of middle-class families in the inner city is bringing real structural and personal changes that directly lower crime rates,” notes another. Even expressions of failure are saturated in this ethos of paternalism. One exasperated volunteer states that “It was difficult to realize that even with all our education and zeal that there was a lot of stuff we can’t do anything about.” Again, this is but one, albeit direct, example of the paternalism expressed in many of the articles about welfare. Welfare recipients are routinely framed as children, the government as a misguided parent, and evangelicals as responsible adults coming in to break the cycle of dependency.
The mid-1990s welfare reform debates are a lightning rod within the pages of *Christianity Today*. The topic, particularly conversations regarding Charitable Choice, is the subject of dozens of articles from the mid-1990s until the present. One interesting element of these discussions is that the broad-brush paternalism and antistatism that appear before Welfare Reform are more routinely countered by more textured case studies explaining how and why the efforts to end welfare may be misguided, even anti-Christian. Almost all of the articles still “concede” that government welfare had failed, and the antistatist diatribes by various evangelicals continue, but the larger debate also starts to include figures from actually existing FBOs who knew first-hand what the rhetoric would mean for their organization. In one example, Pastor Everett Wilson explains the problems that a proposal for welfare recipients to write a letter to their church asking for help before receiving aid would cause for his congregation. He begins the piece by conceding the “obvious”: “There is common agreement that welfare in the United States has become a monstrous consumer of public money from which society receives little payback,” but he goes on to note that organizations like his do not have the resources to respond to such a transfer or to replace government.71 “Only the government...,” he notes, “has the right and power to represent the whole society—to act on behalf of those left over and left out, and through taxation to require everyone to support its programs on their behalf.”72 Thus it is one thing to transfer responsibility from government to churches with funding (FBOs-as-enhancements); it is quite another to transfer financial responsibility to FBOs (FBOs-as-replacements). Viewpoints like these crept back into the pages of *Christianity Today* in the years following Welfare Reform, but governmental welfare is still framed as a serious problem in these pieces. These perspectives are still in the minority. Broad-brush ideologues from the Manhattan Institute, Prison Fellowship, and other known antistatist organizations still entered this debate and continued to push the FBO-as-replacement motif at least as commonly as those who were daring to push the FBO-as-enhancement, or even FBO-as-extension motif. Invoking Nazi Germany and Communist China, Charles Colson argues that Christians should be fearful of a future that involved more welfare by the government and less by FBOs:
Hannah Arendt, a brilliant 20th century political theorist, observed this phenomenon firsthand in Germany, describing in her classic book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* how totalitarian regimes succeed by the atomization of society—creating a mass of individuals isolated from the structures that hold civilized societies together. The result is that individuals are left to stand alone before the immense power of the state. America is far from this, but when I realize how easily it could happen, I am reminded of the unknown man who, in 1989, bravely stood alone in Tiananmen Square before a row of Chinese army tanks. Ensuring this doesn't happen in the U.S. is a solemn responsibility of every Christian.73

The theme of small government neoliberalism is clearly alive and well in the pages of *Christianity Today*, but conversations since Welfare Reform have often been less ideological than this, even periodically sympathetic to a strong governmental role for welfare.

In short, the dialogue about welfare in the pages of *Christianity Today* was more varied than in the NAE policy resolutions. There is a richer texture of actualized examples that come up, a wider variation in biblical verses used to justify various approaches, and a self-conscious desire to debate certain issues rather than come to a singular resolution. That said, the emphasis in *Christianity Today*’s presentation of government welfare is still overwhelmingly antistatist. Government-led welfare is routinely cast as “inhumane,” “inefficient,” “expensive,” and “unnecessary.” But because the evangelical identity is self-consciously built, at least in part, on the idea of compassion, most critiques of government welfare are followed by, or contrasted with, the presentation of suitable alternatives. Most, of course, are framed as manifestly superior to government-led efforts. There is a great deal of variation about the relationship that such organizations should have with government, but the idea of FBOs as an extension—an uncontroversial contracting relationship—is never expressed, nor is the idea that government-led efforts might be better for certain problems. The overwhelming theme is to situate FBOs as enhancements of government: organizations that can provide more effective, efficient welfare, but will rely, in part, on government funds. FBOs are regularly called to enter relationships with government with caution—accept its money, yes, but do not concede one inch to its nefariously secular requests.
Conclusion  The notion that private charity in general, and religious charities in particular, can and should provide welfare instead of large governmental entities is a long, durable, cultural motif in the United States, one that is not unique to a single group. This notion has been common, perhaps central, to neoliberal ideology in the past 30 years. The literature on actualized FBOs complicates both the fantasy of such organizations replacing the state (by demonstrating, among other factors, capacity constraints) and the actualized extent to which it has already happened (by demonstrating that FBOs function in a variety of ways that complicate, or even contradict this notion). This study aimed to determine the influence of this theme within evangelical texts during the last half century. The presence of this theme within evangelical texts is an intriguing and important observation for a number of reasons. First, unlike the general antistatism of the neoliberal/economic conservative branch of the American Right, the identity of many evangelicals ostensibly coalesces around the theme of compassion—particularly for the poor. This theme makes the usual antiwelfarist diatribes discursively challenging for evangelicals. Suggesting, for example, that the welfare state be abolished would be difficult to argue (though some have tried, as above) without coming across as mean-spirited and, worse for this audience, blasphemous. So the discursive contortions required of evangelical voices to simultaneously be antiwelfarist and yet present a compassionate stance towards the poor are interesting in their own right. Most often, this is done by presenting evangelical alternatives—often, though not always FBOs that receive some government funding, but determine who they serve and how they serve them without government oversight. Second, evangelicals still have considerable political influence. As scholars of the American Right have shown, efforts to fuse together disparate wings of the conservative movement in the United States have been challenging. Discursive efforts of this sort—narratives that weave together an evangelical identity with a neoliberal politics—are enormously useful for building political coalitions. Indeed, one might argue that this particular set of narratives—those dealing with welfare—has been responsible for keeping the Republicans in power from the early 1980s until very recently. One might also argue that such narratives can only mask inherent contra-
dictions that currently seem to be splintering the Right. Third, such narratives offer a window into the political capacity of biblical legitimacy. To be sure, the ideas of self-help, small government, and FBO welfare are not unique to evangelicals. Many groups in the United States hold one or several of these tenets as central points of identity. But by the same token, the assignment of Scripture—as is so often the case in both the policy resolutions and Christianity Today articles—can lend a retroactive theological legitimacy to matters that might have begun within firmly secular arenas. Welfare reform, for example, is much harder to defend as compassionate to self-identified evangelicals if one uses the indifferent language of the CATO Institute to justify it. Yet when biblical verses are invoked, not only do they have the potential to bring together evangelical Christians and neoliberals, but they lend a credibility and compassion to the issue that can distract from the most callous features of a policy; Hayek may have been a persuasive man, but his words did not carry the same weight as the Bible among self-identified evangelicals. Evangelical texts, like those featured in this study, are only one piece in a very complicated multilayered puzzle. Examining such voices systematically can illustrate the contours of the idealized welfare model being promoted by a very powerful group, and help in speculating about the extent to which this model serves as political glue binding two very different factions of the American Right.

Notes


8. Many evangelicals are in fact motivated by theological and political movements that resemble a form of religious socialism. The most common form, the Social Gospel, is common among the African American evangelical community in the United States.


Studies in Political Economy


31. To conserve space and conform to the guidelines of this journal, the empirical section of this paper has been shortened from its “working paper” length. Copies of the larger working paper are available on request from the author.


38. For an example of a short resolution, see Public Policy Resolution, “Aid to Sectarian Education,” (1958), National Association of Evangelicals Archives. For a more lengthy resolution, see Public Policy Resolution, “For the Health of a Nation,” (2004), National Association of Evangelicals Archives.


42. NAE, “Heeding the Call of the Poor.”


Studies in Political Economy

45. NAE, “Economic and Cultural Renewal.”
46. NAE, “Charitable Contributions.”
47. NAE, “Charitable Choice”; NAE, “For the Health of a Nation.”
48. NAE, “Church and State Separation”; NAE, “For the Health of a Nation.”
49. NAE, “For the Health of a Nation.”
50. NAE, “For the Health of a Nation.”
51. NAE, “Church and State Separation,” emphasis added.
56. NAE, “Faith Based Initiative.”
57. Figures are available in Christianity Today, “Readership Report,” (2009), <http://www.cti-advertising.com/files/publicationfiles/ChristianityTodayrev03_09.pdf>. Christianity Today is not the most-read evangelical magazine, but arguably the most mainstream, which is why it was chosen for this study.
60. Only substantive references were retained in the database. Substantive was defined as at least one full sentence referring to an actual example of, or the general concept of, welfare.
61. See Elisha, “Moral Ambitions.”
68. Sherman, “How Sharon Baptist discovered.”
69. Sherman, “How Sharon Baptist discovered.”
71. Wilson, “Saving the Safety Net.”
72. Wilson, “Saving the Safety Net.”
73. Charles Colson and Anne Morse, “Protecting our Little Platoons: There’s Reason to be Concerned for the Future of Voluntary Organizations,” Christianity Today 53/6 (June 2009).