

REFERENCE

Cnaan, R. A., Wineburg, R. J., & Boddie, S. C. (1999). *The newer deal: Social work and religion in partnership*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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Faith-Based Social Services: Measures, Assessments, and Effectiveness.

Boddie, S. C. & Cnaan, R. A. (Eds.). (2006). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Pastoral Press.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THERE HAS BEEN A LONG OVERDUE EXPLOSION of high quality research into the extent, characteristics, and most importantly, effectiveness of faith-based social services—an area that has been guided by more heat than light. The bad news is that all this new evidence still doesn't "prove" that faith-based social services are any better or worse than their so-called secular counterparts.

Stephanie Boddie and Ram Cnaan are well qualified to pull together this collection, both having been involved at the forefront of research into this burgeoning field. Common sense tells us that attempting to provide scientific evidence for supernatural/religious phenomena is impossible. Thus, they rightly lay out the parameters for what role social scientists can take.

They focus on the religiousness of the *organizations* delivering the social services, not the interventions themselves, nor on the religiousness of the staff or volunteers who deliver the interventions in these organizations. Although this is a laudable attempt to set manageable boundaries, anyone who is even remotely familiar with faith-based social service agencies will see that these three aspects are often very difficult to disentangle. I suspect many readers of *Social Work & Christianity* would take exception to their claim that "what we are concerned with in this volume is the efficacy of

certain service organizations versus other service organizations *regardless of the interventions applied by specific workers, regardless of the workers' own beliefs, and regardless of the manner in which these beliefs are actualized by the workers*" (p. 14, emphasis added). If a religious organization delivers the same interventions with workers who hold the same beliefs as secular agencies, then one may rightly wonder what exactly it is that makes the organization religious in any meaningful sense.

Researchers and policy makers know all too well that politics and ideology, rather than evidence, are often what drive policy decisions. Nevertheless, opponents and proponents alike are eager to have solid evidence to back their claims. Unfortunately, this collection does not provide any new evidence to bolster either side's case. What it does do is provide helpful methodological directions that will, if followed, yield better evidence.

Two primary contributions to the methodological challenges are noteworthy. First, a strong case is made for the use of randomly controlled clinical trials (RCCT) as the "gold standard" for determining effectiveness. Yet, as many applied social researchers know, there are considerable obstacles to carrying out such studies. Second, in addition to RCCTs, there is a further argument for more sophisticated studies that uncover specific factors that lead to specific outcomes. Drawing from econometrics, von Furstenburg argues, for example, "To yield practical insights that can be acted upon, research must proceed to determine whether there are replicable, and hence manageable and controllable, factors that contribute to differences in performance between groups, and what these factors are" (p. 57).

In addition to methodological directions and challenges, the second section of this collection—entitled "Emerging Empirical Findings"—contributes significantly to the unanswered questions of effectiveness. But the key word here is "emerging." As the volume's editors note, "we are in the infancy stage of faith-based program evaluation . . . and we are many years away from any authoritative or comprehensive answers" (p. 287). On the question of effectiveness, the best that can be said is that "faith-based organizations as a whole are neither superior nor inferior to their secular counterparts. It seems they achieve equal results to secular providers" (p. 288).

While the contribution to the field of faith-based services is worthwhile, I doubt this book will be of much use beyond those specifically engaged in research. In fact, "book" itself is a misnomer, since this is

really a special issue of the *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* repackaged and “co-published” as a book. Other than a different title, however, there is no difference from the journal issue, and thus it is not clear what additional contribution is made by Haworth Press’s practice of co-publishing that offsets the citation confusion created by identical publications under different covers.

For those actively engaged in research and policy on the cutting-edge questions of faith-based social services, this contribution is essential. If, however, the methodological minutiae or the lack of certainty all feel just a bit unsatisfying, I would recommend skipping the “book” and just getting a copy of the final article by Netting and her colleagues. They report on a qualitative study in which they asked people simply, “What is it about your program that makes it faith-based?” This article is rich with the nuances, variations, and contradictions in faith-based social service work, and gives voice to the underlying depth of commitments and the importance of interpretation that often are lost in quantitative assessments. One of their conclusions I suspect will resonate for many who are committed and invested in their work in faith-based organizations:

To fully capture faith-based programs, it is necessary to understand assumptions underlying each program’s expressed values of accountability to God and service. Only then will we understand what really motivates the persons who work and volunteer in these programs (p. 279).

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Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Resources in Mental Health
Norcross, J., & Santrock, J. (2003) New York: Guilford Press.

SELF-HELP LITERATURE IS AS AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE. BEGINNING WITH Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (1732), Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), and Steven Covey’s *The Seven*

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