

The following essay is included in the fourth Spirited Debate essay collection, “Reflections on Religion and Public Life in America,” and is paired with an essay by Michele Margolis, “At the Nexus of Politics and Religion: Dialoguing Toward Democratic Renewal.” Also closely related is “Bending the Arc of Public Policy to Make Government a Partner with Communities and Faith,” a three-part series by Stanley Carlson-Thies that constitutes the third Spirited Debate essay collection. To see all the Spirited Debate essays currently published and continue reading about the PRRUCS Religion & Democratic Renewal project, see [Spirited Debate](#).

A More Perfect Union? Bending the Arc? Or a de Tocqueville American Tour?

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Summits like Common Ground for Common Cause, to say nothing of the daily headlines, exemplify what we all know to be true—religion and government have once again become hot topics in the public debate. Truth be told, it’s not much of a debate. Headlines shout and social media incites. School boards wrestle with teachers over whether certain books should or should not be taught. Courts decide who must serve whom in bakeries and more life-threatening cases of reproductive rights and access to medical care. All in the name of religion—whose religion, whose rights to believe or not believe, are questions for which positions seem only to harden, voices grow louder and it’s easy to imagine that violence is not far behind.

Reading the headlines, glancing at the cable news playing in the gym, or checking social media feeds, it’s hard not to come away with the impression that religion is more about division and condemnation than outreach and care, more about violence and hatred than love. Faces distorted and signs condemning passersby to hell. Suicide vests and drone-launched weapons tearing apart the bodies of nonbelievers and “other believers.” Even lifesaving vaccines positioned as the work of the devil. White Christian nationalism calling for authoritarian enforcement of new laws determining what people can read, what children can be taught, who can love whom, and which citizens have the right to vote, all intended to retrieve a mythical American past and the supremacy of the few. Whether realized through sectarian warfare or competing lawfare, religion appears to be primarily about being part of a tribe or team and heading into battle to determine who will come out on top.

It's unsurprising that the first thought of those looking to tackle major social problems is not "Well, now, perhaps religious groups could help us solve this problem." It is also not a surprise that those called to ministry find themselves emphasizing charity and social services while avoiding the "political" at all costs. Yet both groups—the academics, policy researchers, and policymakers searching for solutions, and the clergy and lay leaders deterred from pursuing justice—are missing an opportunity: the opportunity to achieve life-changing, lifesaving systemic change by leveraging the unique capabilities and contributions of faith communities and their members as allies and leaders in social change.

I'll elucidate the distinctive contributions and power of faith communities in social movements later in this paper. But first, some context for these initial insights and my recent work. I've come to my inquiry into the topic of faith communities and faith-based organizations and social change from outside the long-standing academic circles. My first book was on the rebuilding of U.S. Special Operations Forces; my second, on the farmworkers of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their successful establishment of a groundbreaking model for defining, claiming, and protecting the human rights of farm and other low-wage workers. Admittedly, these are topics seemingly unrelated to the discussion here. Nonetheless, I promise that there is a through line.

I'd be remiss if I did not acknowledge that my attention has been drawn to the promise of this topic in part because of personal interest. I was raised in the church in the sense that attending services and joining an early-teen youth group were part of my childhood. I stepped away from formal religion in my later teens, but deeper, more thoughtful, and perhaps more active faith came with adulthood, family, and the gift of being part of two vibrant Episcopal church communities, one outside of Washington, D.C., and one in Santa Monica, California. This foundation likely kept me open to the positive aspects of religion and faith communities, and it certainly was a cause of my frustration and dismay when confronted with the anger and exclusion and basic meanness that we've seen at protests, in speeches, and in the news.

Professionally, I've been a policy researcher and analyst, as well as a policymaker, for nearly all of my career. I've long sought to identify and understand the challenges we wrestle with as a society and nation. More importantly, I've searched out what *works*, what makes the seemingly intractable tractable. How do we solve, mitigate, and reverse new challenges and those that have been with us

for generations, if not centuries? And I've seen that we can't get there if we don't put all options on the table and invite all potential contributors to join us there.

As I searched for solutions, my colleagues pointed me toward a path I hadn't considered. I first came to understand the scale and scope of faith-based organizations and social-service delivery through the work of my RAND colleague Katherine Derosé, who examined church-based support to military veterans, increased uptake of HIV treatment protocols through churches in the Dominican Republic, and the lifesaving role of Black churches and pastors in reducing the stigma of HIV among their congregations, leading to testing and treatment. Don Kettl and John J. DiJulio Jr. offered the concept of "government by proxy" and the reality that faith-based organizations are delivering many federally funded social services. Ram Cnaan took this idea even further, with his systematic look at not only the extent of social services delivered by faith-based organizations but also the financial value of those services. Most in this country are aware of the food pantry (or, ideally, food co-op) or after-school program offered by the neighborhood synagogue, mosque, or church. The surprise for most—including many policymakers, policy researchers, and social activists—is the scale, scope, and demonstrable effects of this work.

The last steppingstone toward this path is from my own work. While working on *I Am Not a Tractor*, I wasn't surprised to learn that students have been essential allies of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and its Campaign for Fair Food. Social activism is what we hope to see, even when it makes us a bit crazy, on college campuses and from those in their teens and twenties. We want the "next generation" to care about the world before them and what is to come. In the case of the CIW and its Campaign for Fair Food, the human rights movement has been conceptualized and led from the beginning by the farmworkers, those directly affected by the robbing, beating, rape, and modern-day slavery that is far too common in large-scale agriculture. When the CIW shifted its strategy from focusing on traditional organizing tactics to the food supply chain as a whole, farmworkers understood that major corporate buyers, including Taco Bell, McDonald's, and Burger King, held the power to raise workers' wages and end the abuse in the fields. The vulnerability of the corporations is their brands, their reputations, and the consumers who have a choice in where they spend their food dollars. This is where the students enter the equation. The target market for these fast-food giants is 18- to 24-year-olds. Thus, students had their own motivation to ally with the farmworkers to raise sub-poverty wages and end the abuse. When the Taco Bell boycott concluded

with the corporation signing the first Fair Food Agreement in 2005, students from more than 300 universities had signed on in alliance with the farmworkers of the CIW.

What I hadn't expected was that the other key ally for the farmworkers and the Campaign for Fair Food would be faith communities and faith-based organizations. Support has come from individuals of faith, from congregations, and from national institutions including clergy organizations and entire denominations. Faith-based support has come from across the political spectrum and has been far more than "thoughts and prayers" and expressions of concern. Members of the faith community have marched, written letters, provided logistical support, advocated, preached, testified, boycotted, made formal declarations of support, and facilitated talks between farmworkers and corporate leaders. This is not passive support or charitable contributions of clothing. Members of faith communities and faith-based organizations determined that ending farmworker abuse was a matter of justice—and they've taken a stand and took action.

In the years following *Tractor*, the critical role of faith allies in the Campaign for Fair Food stayed with me. Confronted with the headlines, I knew that underneath the storm and churn is a reality lost on most. Academic and policy worlds, particularly at the federal level, tend to dismiss, or at least visibly shudder at, the idea of positive contributions from faith-based organizations. But research and analysis done by well-respected academics and popular historians including Robert Putnam and Jon Meachem has shown us *not only the conflict* tied to religion but also *the positive contributions* of faith organizations to our communities. The focus of this work has largely been on faith organizations and the critical social services they provide. My questions are complementary to this work, moving from symptoms to causes, asking where faith communities have been vital to the success of actions and movements that have moved American society forward, toward justice and equality, toward our aspiration of a more perfect union.

Skeptical as they might be, when the point is made, academics, researchers, and the general public acknowledge faith communities and organizations were essential in the abolition and civil rights movements. Evangelical churches, Jewish congregations and rabbis, and the Black Church were essential to the social and systemic change of these defining movements. But what about more recent examples? I've written about the critical role of faith allies in the transformational movement

of the CIW. And I am now asking whether this is a unique contemporary case or whether there is more that we haven't yet seen.

Eyes now opened, I've undertaken the "de Tocqueville tour" cited by my friend and colleague John J. DiIulio Jr. I've read more closely, listened more intently, and traveled to meet with movement leaders this past year and a half and heard the faith communities not only calling for love's requirement of justice and equality but also taking action to achieve it. I'm still in the middle of this exploration, but what I can say is that I've seen clerical collars, shawls, and head coverings among marchers recognizing the dignity of all workers; in the pulpits and courtrooms of Georgia demanding the right and responsibility to vote; and lining Nashville's streets and gathered in the rotunda of Tennessee's capitol calling for an end to the killing of innocents. And I've read the written word of faith communities sent to the physical and electronic mailboxes of state legislators and members of Congress alike calling for those with power to use their resources to end hunger. Not as visible have been clergy and lay leaders coming together across denominations and faith traditions, joining with nonprofits and activists around conference tables, working white boards, actively debating, and then overcoming the division of dogma to build the bridge of shared values. What matters more is that these faithful voices and actions are not only protesting wrongs but also bringing about real, measurable, and sustainable change. As allies and leaders, faith communities are bringing not only relief from the symptoms but also changes to the systems.

Let's step back for a moment. I began my exploration where I had a foundation of knowledge—with the CIW. I knew the "what"—congregations hosting workers as Truth Tours crossed the country, and the power of the United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, and other denominations coming out in support of first the Taco Bell boycott and the subsequent campaigns to bring McDonald's, Burger King, Trader Joe's, and others into the Fair Food Program.

I knew I needed to get beyond the "what" to the "why" and "how." And I'll note that this is the tie between my earlier books and this new endeavor. Why was it important to rebuild U.S. Special Operations Forces after the chaos and tragedy of the Vietnam War and its execution? Why did the farmworkers of Immokalee come together, and once they won the battle with fast-food

corporations and major suppliers, how did they build out the internationally recognized Fair Food Program?

In my current work, I am asking the “why” and “how” questions of the farmworkers’ faith allies. I’ve dug deeper, met with pastors and rabbis and congregants, and buried myself in the archives, discovering countless letters of support, bulletin inserts, and internal memos of faith-based organizations. With each conversation had or dusty box uncovered, my understanding of “why” and “how” has grown, and, more importantly, I’ve begun to see the unique value and contributions of the faith community to the Campaign.

As I’ve cast my net wider, I’ve learned of other cases, both visible and invisible, of faith communities working to change the conditions that result in the abuse, disenfranchisement, and disregard of the physical needs of our neighbors. As mentioned earlier, instances of the faith community’s good work of serving the poor, feeding the hungry, comforting the imprisoned, and welcoming the refugee are not hard to find. What I am looking for, however, is outside of these efforts. Where has the faith community, where have faith organizations, moved from the symptoms to solutions? Where has the faith community either led or been a critical ally in movements to address the causes and systemic weaknesses and had demonstrable success in doing so? Where has the faith community brought its power to bear to force change? And then the same questions I asked of the CIW’s faith allies—why did they do so and how?

Turning to where this work has taken me, I have chosen to focus within the United States, even as I recognize that my three major cases all have global connections and implications. Each of the cases is informed by several others. First, of course, is the Campaign for Fair Food and workers’ rights. The issues of hunger and poverty brought me to the second case study: the decades of work by Bread for the World and the related Circle of Protection. And the third contemporary case, with its roots in the Civil Rights Movement, is voting rights and the protection of democracy. And in the course of examining these cases, I am touching on related examples ranging from gun violence to faith-based institutional investing coalitions to peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives.

There will be another time and place, notably when I complete my research and book, for telling the stories of the people, actions, and world-changing results that define each of these cases; to introduce Rev. Noelle Damico, Rev. Sen. Kim Jackson, Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster, Rev. David

Beckmann, Mr. Lucas Benitez, and Ms. Helen Butler, to name just a few of the people who have accomplished extraordinary change. For now, I'd like to share with you five contributions I've identified so far that cut across these cases—contributions that are indicative of the distinct power of faith leadership and alliances in successful social movements.

Let's start with the essential characteristic of faith. As allies or leaders, faith communities bring to social movements tangible *hope*. This is not fluffy “hope for the best” but the strong hope, as Jim Wallis says, of believing in a future in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change. Such hope provides joy and beauty that are hard to find when you are trying to change the hateful, the ugly, and the oppressive. Righteous as the cause might be, running only on anger, fear, and hate, there is a point at which the intensity exhausts the people of the movement. Fighting for justice takes time and persistence. Hope builds up. Fear and anger tear down. When exhaustion hits, the hope of the faith community provides to movement leaders and participants refuge and a belief in a future in which the long arc of the moral universe does actually bend toward justice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. borrowed these words from the Abolitionist Movement, as he brought the hope of a better future to the Civil Rights Movement. Faith allies brought such hope to the Campaign for Fair Food even as forced labor cases were uncovered.

Second, faith-based groups, through their support, presence, and engagement, *influence the nature of a movement's message and how it presents itself*, sharpening the moral edge of the message. Faith organizations and leaders are generally accorded social power and respect when it comes to issues of morality. This power extends beyond personal morality to social morality—what we owe our neighbors and how we build John Lewis's “beloved community.” Just this past year, the presence and testimony of clergy and lay leaders on the road leading to the Tennessee state capitol in Nashville made clear the moral foundation, as opposed to simple political partisanship, of anti-gun violence legislation. Bread for the World and the faith coalition Circle of Protection leveraged shared values to convince the House of Representatives to extend the Child Tax Credit. The CIW's message was intensified and amplified through public endorsements by major denominations and with testimony from pulpits and in Capitol Hill committee rooms.

The visual embodiment of hope and its refuge brings us to the third contribution of faith allies or leadership to social movements—*space for ritual and spiritual organizing*. Whether it is Souls to

the Polls, a day of prayer to make hunger a problem of the past, or concluding a hunger strike with the breaking of the bread, ritual brings a quiet power that amplifies social movement actions and cannot be provided by other allies. Faith rituals highlight a call to something higher and provide a commissioning for sacrifice and service. When done with respect, pausing to gather, light candles, and say prayers with clergy from across faiths and denominations, faith rituals move *all* participants of faith and conscience, whether an individual is religious or not.

Moving from the symbolic to the highly practical, the value of *existing grassroots networks* cannot be understated. There's a reason we refer to "organized religion"! It's been noted that "bricks-and-mortar" worship spaces are a bygone era for some. Nonetheless, nearly all churches, synagogues, and mosques have regular services, committees, and newsletters, and perhaps even annual meetings. There are local connections between congregations in the same denomination and interfaith alliances connecting across faith communities. National organizations connect within denominations, often with annual conventions and councils. And interfaith organizations such as the National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals reach across denominations and faith. Lastly, connections continue in collaborations between faith-based organizations and national nongovernmental organizations such as the Carter Center and the Vote to End Hunger coalition. This "network of networks," already in place, brings visibility, provides logistical or philanthropic support, and enables powerful alliances calling for change.

Easily overlooked but no less important, faith allies can make an *intellectual contribution* to social movements. Sermons or academic articles. "Church-y" language" and well-known Bible verses or sophisticated theological and ethical arguments. Faith leaders write commentaries, lectionary guides, and academic papers on topics ranging from the faith community's responsibility in the antitrafficking movement to economic theory in the context of the biblical world. Biblical teachings on food and justice, theological arguments against capital punishment, and academic and national news outlet series on faith and public life. All provide an intellectual foundation for understanding and addressing the challenges of this world.

The last contribution of faith communities and organizations I'll highlight is perhaps the least likely contribution imagined by a skeptical public or academics—*bridge-building*. Working across partisan and political ideological divides, bridge-building may occur organically, a simple fact of life

when faith organizations ally in a major movement, as we've seen in the faith allies of the CIW. The wide range of faith communities that joined with the farmworkers all viewed physical abuse, wage theft, and forced labor as violating their own values. They ranged from Unitarians to Methodists, Catholic social teaching advocates and conservatives, Reform rabbis, and Latino Pentecostals. In the Taco Bell and McDonald's campaigns, the church was a home for fast-food executives and farmworkers alike. Farmworkers joined executives in their church homes, and each saw the other in a new context, as sisters and brothers in faith. At other times, bridge-building requires deliberate and close attention to balancing, ensuring the interfaith coalition doesn't allow one political perspective to overcome the other. Such balancing is essential to the Circle of Protection and in the partnering in Nashville that saw liberal Red-Letter Christians and conservative Christ Presbyterian churches standing together in their call for anti-gun violence legislation in the wake of the Covenant School shooting.

Perhaps most revealing is when those from outside the faith community call upon it, with the intent of building bridges across chasms that appear too deep and wide to overcome. Signing the Belfast Agreement between the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the political parties of Northern Ireland, the signatories and President Bill Clinton's envoy George Mitchell might have thought the deal was done. Looking back, the critical element in bringing the agreement to life and sustaining the fragile peace was the support of the Catholic and Protestant churches. The churches' support validated the moral foundation of ending the violence and was essential in disarming the warring factions—a process that took decades. Rev. Gary Mason, a Methodist minister intimately involved in the work of these Northern Ireland churches, is now using the reconciliation and peacebuilding model developed there in the United States. As an adviser to the Faith Forward Democracy effort initiated by the Carter Center, Rev. Mason is working with faith leaders from across the political spectrum with the intent of identifying common values to avoid furthering splintering and promote bridging across the civil divide in the United States.

Hope in a future believed, if still unseen. Strengthening the moral foundation and message of a movement. Providing space for ritual and spiritual organizing. Contributing to the intellectual foundation of a cause. Embracing the practicality and possibility of existing grassroots networks. And bridge-building across political and ideological divides. Each of these is an element of the distinct contributions faith communities and faith-based organizations bring to social movements and even

public policy. Bending the arc? Moving toward a more perfect union? My still-underway de Tocqueville journey has uncovered for me the power that the faith community can bring, and has brought, in alliance with activists, nongovernmental organizations, and government officials—contributions that have long been overlooked and even dismissed. Securing voting rights for all citizens. Reducing hunger and poverty around the world. Protecting farmworkers’ human rights. The victories are real; the changes, profound. And faith communities and organizations have been essential.

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