



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

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## FREEDOM TO SERVE THE VULNERABLE

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### Religious Freedom and the Social Safety Net

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The past four decades have witnessed a marked change in [people's understanding of their ethnic and religious identities](#). With that has come a shift in what individuals think of when they think of faith-based organizations, religious exercise, and religious freedom. Decades ago, language of “religious exercise” may have conjured images of WASP-y, middle-aged women singing in a church choir. Now, if I ask college students to describe an image that comes to mind when I say “religious exercise,” I get answers as varied as “A Native American wearing an eagle feather to a graduation,” or “A Muslim community center serving refugees,” or “A Sikh wearing a turban in the military.”

It is a good thing that many young people understand the inherent diversity of the ways in which individuals and organizations live out their most sacred beliefs and practices-- in public and in private. But increasing ethnic and religious diversity alone does not translate into increased tolerance for religious freedom for those individuals and institutions who have very different ways to answer the most basic religious questions. Few public opinion researchers and media voices are presenting the public with helpful approaches for the challenges of advancing the freedoms of peoples and institutions who strongly disagree in the pluralist public square.

With Americans only hearing about religious freedom in the narrow context of “birth control, baking, and bathrooms,” they miss the broader picture of religious freedom and of the immense social good performed by faith-based organizations. Last year, a significant study was released that quantifies the socio-economic impact of faith in America. The [report](#), written by Brian and Melissa Grimm and published by the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, estimates that congregations, faith-based nonprofits, and faith-inspired businesses currently contribute 1.2 trillion dollars annually to American society, more than the ten biggest tech companies combined.

This report summarizes what many of us already know to be true. Daily, organizations that make up the diverse faith-based sector are providing housing to low-income families, serving senior citizens with dignity, advocating for foster youth, connecting people with disabilities to vocational training, empowering returning citizens to reintegrate into their communities, and so much more. The plurality of these faith-based organizations provides a tangible social good to diverse Americans with distinctive needs.

Think of an economically disadvantaged Orthodox Jewish family that needs supplemental nutrition assistance. They desire to honor God by keeping kosher, and they also want to feed their children. Distinctive and particularized organizations like [kosher food banks](#) meet both the spiritual and physical needs of a highly specific vulnerable people group. Or consider how [more than a dozen](#) local mosques stepped in after Hurricane Harvey to provide hundreds of people, of all religious backgrounds, with shelter. These diverse faith-based civil society institutions play a vital role in meeting both the particularized needs of specific populations and in serving their broader communities as a tenet of their faith.

## **Connecting Religious Freedom, the Sacred Sector, and the Social Safety Net**

In this series, we define the social safety net as both government programs that contribute to the well-being of vulnerable communities, and the vast, diverse institutions of civil society, including faith-based and community-based groups that serve these communities as well. Creating the space for many institutions to make their unique contributions to the social safety net requires that the faith-based nonprofit sector--what we call the sacred sector—has the freedom for its institutions to serve and carry out their missions.

Faith-based organizations daily serve the most vulnerable neighbors among us. In our call to serve our neighbors, we must care about the freedom of faith-based organizations to do their work in their particular way. This series will highlight the good partnerships that the sacred sector has and can have with government and argues for preserving and advancing those partnerships to better serve the vulnerable.

This series will also present a framework that helps Christians to develop a holistic vision of religious freedom's role in creating a strong social safety net. This vision certainly engages public policy questions, but it also calls us to account for our own personal and collective practices that are expressions of our faith. We must attend to the substance and tone of the language we use as it shapes discussion of how religious freedom affects the work of faith-based organizations who partner with government to provide distinct services and programs for the vulnerable among us.

## The Social Safety Net: Why Government AND Civil Society Are Vital

What is government's role in addressing the most pressing social problems of the most vulnerable within our political communities? This question does not have an easy answer. Even those of us who advocate for a public justice framework which insists on a positive, yet limited, role for government will have different boundaries on the extent of government involvement in addressing the opioid epidemic, or natural disaster relief, or health care for the most economically disadvantaged.

As Dan Carter wrote in a recent article for [Shared Justice](#): "So why should the government and Christians support social programs? Those who advocate for these types of cuts [to entitlement programs] often cite how other institutions within civil society will step into the gap. While this is partially true, this argument overlooks the fact that local institutions are the recipients of a large proportion of this federal money in the form of grants." In addition to place-based organizations, many partners in the social safety net are faith-based organizations from diverse and distinctive backgrounds.

I'd like to suggest four principles to help guide our understanding of how and why we uphold a robust partnership between government and FBOs and other nonprofits to support our care for the vulnerable:

1. CPJ's [Guideline on Political Community](#) focuses on why it is important to protect the freedom of religious organizations to fully live out their faith-based identities in how they operate, serve, and engage in the public square. We must not only protect the rights of individuals in a diverse society, but we must also advance the rights of diverse organizations with their distinctive missions and values. This is particularly important in any conversation about the social safety net in America. Our increasingly diverse society needs an increasingly diverse network of organizations to serve the particularized needs of its citizenry. One of the articles in this series will illustrate this further as it explores the unique and vital role that African American-led faith groups play in providing religiously and culturally relevant resources and services to support the health of black families.
2. CPJ's [Guideline on Government](#) focuses on the idea that God's good purposes for government go beyond punishing crime and protecting our borders. Government rightly plays a role in affirmatively caring for our most vulnerable neighbors, often through partnering with diverse civil society organizations, including faith-based institutions. In this series, we will see how this principle is borne out in how government can partner with various community and religious groups to help address the opioid crisis.
3. Religious freedom must apply to groups as well as individuals, and it must apply to non-explicitly religious activities, as well as religious acts like worship. CPJ's [Religious Freedom Guideline](#) focuses on the importance of faith-based organizations preserving

their religious identity and practices even as they participate in the social safety net in partnership with government. In this series, we will show how this principle applies when houses of worship are excluded from FEMA rebuilding grants following natural disasters solely because of their religious identity.

4. CPJ's [Welfare Guideline](#) emphasizes how government has a positive, yet limited role in fulfilling its responsibilities to the most vulnerable Americans. It can do this by protecting the abilities of various civil society institutions to meet diverse welfare needs, while also supporting the work of these institutions, both financially and otherwise. In this series, we will explore the innovative ways that government can serve the least among us by partnering with neighborhood and faith-based services providers, a prime example of which is federally qualified health clinics.

This series invites us to think about institutional religious freedom in a new way, and to connect this essential constitutional value to the flourishing of a robust social safety net made up of innovative and diverse partnerships between government and the sacred sector, as well as the larger nonprofit sector. It is a simple attempt to help shift the dialogue, and the assumptions, around religious freedom, even if very incrementally. We hope to equip readers to think about how religious freedom, viewed through the lens of principled pluralism, plays a vital role in undergirding the distinctiveness and diversity of civil society organizations that partner with government to form the social safety net.

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