



PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

FREEDOM TO SERVE THE VULNERABLE

Vol. 6, 2017

Religious Freedom and Government Partnerships: Where Do We Go from Here?

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In this series, we have explored how a public justice framework helps us positively address some of the most significant social problems of our time. As we've taken a closer look at issues such as natural disaster relief, the opioid epidemic, and the health care needs of underserved communities, we have seen how vital religious freedom is for serving our most vulnerable neighbors through the partnerships between government and civil society institutions that make up the social safety net. Throughout the series, we have also discussed how we can support a robust role for faith-based institutions and uphold the good role of government in providing for the well-being of our communities.

This public justice framework matters because it avoids the dualism that is especially prevalent in today's highly polarized public discourse. All too often, we easily fall into the narrative that religious freedom, on the one hand, and social safety net programs, on the other, reflect competing and incompatible political ideologies. Many view religious freedom as a conservative value that entails restraining the ever-growing coercive hand of government. And many view social safety net programs as reflecting a liberal commitment to human flourishing made possible in major part by government action.

The public justice perspective resists both of these polarized options, and insists, instead, on holding two key principles together: 1) Government has something affirmative and indispensable to contribute to human flourishing, especially in lifting up the most vulnerable members of society, and 2) People and a variety of institutions also have affirmative and indispensable roles to play in lifting up the most vulnerable, and so the government must limit its action in support of those nongovernmental entities.

The Positive, But Limited, Task of Government

If we were to sum up this public justice framework for understanding the role of government in a Tweetable, bumper-sticker length blurb, it would be this: “Government has a positive, but limited, task.” But what does this mean, exactly?

It means that government plays a vital role in making possible human flourishing, beyond its obvious tasks of securing borders and restraining violence and lawlessness. And yet, as it promotes human flourishing, government should be bounded. Government must limit its own actions so that citizens themselves can be active on behalf of their neighbors through individual efforts and through participating together in a variety of associations and organizations.

But the idea of a “positive but limited government” seems inherently paradoxical. If we lean too heavily towards the “positive” part of this idea, we can tend to stress the need for large government programs in areas such as economic justice, education, poverty relief, and health care. This approach can over emphasize what government can do to address complex social challenges while neglecting the weaknesses of a government-alone approach. With respect to the social safety net, this approach suggests that whatever the challenge, from homelessness to the struggles of low-income families both to earn a sufficient income and to ensure quality care for their children, the answer must be provided by government itself through programs of its own or by funding private responses.

Seeing government’s responsibility this way neglects the role of diverse civil society organizations in addressing complex social challenges, either through acting on their own or in partnership with government. Although government should play a positive role, it need not, and usually should not, do it all on its own. Place-based and faith-based organizations are often most suited to serving their communities. They are right where they are needed, they understand the cultural context, and they typically enjoy the trust of those seeking assistance.

But if we lean too heavily towards the “limited” part of government’s task, we neglect the strengths that government uniquely brings to addressing social problems. Those strengths include the ability to transfer resources from places of surplus to those of need, providing uniformity and persistence even when impulses of generosity wane. Insisting only on the limited task of government often dismisses governmental programs that aim to empower the vulnerable or blanketly criticizes those programs as

inherently wasteful and ineffective. Or government initiatives are dismissed with the argument that “if the church would just be the church,” then government intervention would not be needed at all.

Understanding the role of government as being limited rightly recognizes how much human flourishing depends on a flourishing civil society. It means affirming how vital it is that government respects religious freedom, both individual and institutional, because serving our neighbors cannot be divorced from our religious motivations and institutions. Government’s restraint in regulating the religious activities of individuals and organizations is an important feature of the responsibility of government to limit itself. A one-sided stress on limiting government will miss government’s affirmative role in promoting human flourishing.

Conclusion

In this series, we have outlined this public justice framework for thinking about the social safety net, applying the idea of a positive, but limited task for government, in partnership with civil society institutions, to very specific areas of social challenge. For example, in [her article on Federally Qualified Health Centers](#), Chelsea Maxwell dispelled the notion that religious freedom and welfare programs are inherently opposed. She wrote, “By bolstering the work of health centers and equipping them to expand their work through both financial and nonfinancial partnerships that do not compromise their faith-based identities, FQHC designation is an example of government upholding both its welfare and religious freedom responsibilities.” In [his article on the opioid crisis](#), Caleb Acker observed, “Government at all levels can learn from faith-based approaches [to addressing the opioid crisis], both in prevention and recovery, and it should ensure that faith-based organizations and services recipients have their religious freedom protected.”

Whether the issue is natural disasters, racial justice, health-care access, or substance abuse, a public justice framework enables us to attend to all the important dimensions and institutions, neglecting neither government nor civil society, ignoring neither religious freedom nor effective help. As we respond to the needs of our vulnerable neighbors, may we be citizens who embrace the difficult task of advancing a vision of public justice, one which recognizes the role of both government and other distinctive organizations, particularly religious groups, in addressing our most pressing societal challenges.

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