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Editor's Watch

Searching for the Center's Public Philosophy

By James W. Skillen

In the Spring issue of the *Boston Review* (vol. 30, no. 2, 2005)—a political and literary forum—Lew Daly wrote an extended essay in search of the underlying philosophy of President Bush's faith-based initiative (<http://bostonreview.net/BR30.2/daly.html>). Among other things, Daly says in "Compassion Capital" that "the remarkable story of how a religious theory of the limited state came to influence American social policy begins with the Center for Public Justice." He goes on to discuss some of the historical roots of the Center as well as to consider Catholic Social Teaching and some of the influences on the Bush administration coming from more conservative, libertarian groups.

While Daly gets many things right, his essay is misleading in several ways, according to James Skillen and Stanley Carlson-Thies, who responded to Daly's essay with a letter that appears in the summer issue of the journal (vol. 30, nos. 3-4). Skillen and Carlson-Thies say that Daly "sets off on the wrong track with his claim that 'the faith-based initiative is about helping churches, not about reducing poverty or improving social services.'" They also disagree with Daly's comment that "Charitable choice [in the 1996 welfare reform law] is controversial in part because it allows churches to discriminate on the basis of religion while receiving federal support." To the contrary, they say, the injustice of discrimination existed prior to Charitable Choice when faith-based groups were denied the opportunity to participate in publicly funded welfare programs unless they secularized themselves.

Daly's article also left the impression that all those who influenced President Bush's faith-based initiative fully supported the outcome of the administration's efforts. But the Center for Public Justice takes an approach that is not fully incorporated in current policy, and Daly does not draw out the Center's distinctive perspective with full accuracy and clarity.

In response to the Skillen-Carlson-Thies letter, Daly agrees with them in part, but says that the letter concentrated on minor matters rather than the major concern of his essay. "Whether social services are delivered by religious believers is a relatively minor

question in the final analysis,” Daly writes. A “true faith-based initiative on poverty would begin by pressing churches to oppose government policies that actively hurt poor communities and households. . . . We need to get government out of the business of harming the poor before we can address the ineffectiveness of some of its efforts to help them.” Daly refers here to the need for changes in labor policy, education policy, the criminal justice system, and institutional racism, but these reach far beyond the scope of welfare and social-policy reforms on which his initial essay focused. In the Center does advocate fundamental structural reforms in education policy. And Skillen and Carlson-Thies would agree that public justice requires significant reforms in other areas.

Skillen and Carlson-Thies conclude their letter this way: “We support neither the privatization of public responsibility nor the governmentalization of charitable efforts whenever government cooperates with nongovernmental organizations.” The wider implications of the structural pluralism that lies behind this statement are implications that Daly did not adequately uncover. However, since the Center for Public Justice has not yet developed principled proposals on labor policy, criminal justice, and institutionalized racism, Daly’s remarks can serve as a goad to the Center to expand its work in these areas in the future.

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