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# For God so loved the world: the politics of religious community service

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Thesis

**FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD:  
THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY SERVICE**

by

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B.A., Boston University, 2020

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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**FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD:  
THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY SERVICE**

**VICTORIA REIM**

**ABSTRACT**

A case study of seven religious institutions in the Greater Boston Area, this paper attempts to analyze the similarities and differences between religious-based and state-based social service programs beginning by examining the motivations of religious leaders and the influence various conceptions of poverty have on religious poverty programs and outreach. The paper begins with an overview of the current literature on the effects of government welfare programs and policies on the populations they target. It then continues with common categorizations of poverty used by scholars to understand government programs and concludes by using these categories as a starting point for understanding the points of view of local religious leaders towards the people they serve.

## PREFACE

Since the development of the modern welfare state, government institutions have been a clear source of poverty related service. States have approached the issue of poverty in many ways, from workhouses to means-tested programs to universal assistance to tax expenditures. The elderly, women, children, and workers among others have been the focus of various state programs. In the United States, the federal welfare state has experienced an evolution from an emphasis on cash and in-kind transfers in the 1960s and 1970s to an expansion of aid through the tax code and use of work requirements since the 1980s. It is also important to note that when we speak of the “state” we acknowledge that the state is not a unitary actor creating policies in a neutral vacuum. In the United States there are significant differences in how the Democratic Party and Republican Party think of the poor and of the state’s responsibility towards them. Even individual politicians conceive of the poor in different ways within the two major parties.

However, before the state became involved in aiding the poor, communities themselves took up the responsibility of helping those in need. At the center of this service in many communities were religious organizations. Built into every religious tradition exists a call to serve the poor and those in need. Once the state created formal institutions to also serve these populations, how did religious institutions respond? How do religious leaders view their role in an environment where many people consider the state to be the main provider of social services and where there is an increased secularization of society? We must ask ourselves where contemporary religious leaders

find their motivations for providing community services if we are to gain a deeper understanding of how vulnerable communities relate to societal actors beyond the state. Scholars have established that government officials and government policies send messages to members of society and these messages shape how citizens see themselves and the state (Schneider & Ingram 1993; Bruch, Ferree, & Soss 2010). The state, however, is not the only actor which sends messages to people about their place in society. This study begins the important work of answering the question of how non-governmental messages to vulnerable groups affect their symbolic and literal place in society by focusing on analyzing the motivations of religious leaders who provide community services. Do religious leaders provide food and shelter to the poor for the same reasons that the state does? Do religious leaders even speak of “the poor,” or do they have different conceptions of the groups they serve? The factors which motivate politicians to act; partisanship, personal background, interest group pressure, electability, understandably receive substantial attention in political science. I attempt to examine the factors which propel local religious leaders to respond to poverty and other community concerns.



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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CCC	Conservative Congregational Christian
GBIO	Greater Boston Interfaith Organization
ICNA	Islamic Circle of North America
ISBCC	Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center
MCSS	Muslim Community Support Services
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
UCC	United Church of Christ

## INTRODUCTION

Do religious leaders think of the poor in the same ways that political scientists have argued that government officials do? This qualitative case study of several religious organizations in and around Boston Massachusetts attempts to find the answer to this question. In the next chapters we will examine how the state thinks about poverty and how these conceptions lead to diverse programs and consequences for recipients. We will find that some religious leaders do speak of community outreach and poverty in ways that sound familiar to scholars of social constructions of poverty, but still there are unexplored dimensions to what religious leaders bring to the table when they hand out food to the homeless, outreach to the elderly, or organize around race relations in their church.

During my conversations with these religious representatives, their faith as well as the environment and community around them served as profound motivations for the work they lead. I argue that there is something to be said for faith-based community organizing both because of the resources and perspectives they bring to the table. As one Reverend stated when asked about the differences he saw between the government and the church in terms of providing services, “We are here permanently to serve the needs of our community. We’re not campaigning every four years, two years, to see if we can get a job.” Religious organizations are, and have been, a constant social presence in our communities and we should hear what they are saying to the people they serve.

## **CHAPTER ONE: THE PARTICIPATORY EFFECTS OF GOVERNMENT**

### **POVERTY PROGRAMS**

#### **Section One: Structures and Actors**

I will start with an analysis of the implications of conceptions of the poor and poverty programs because I hope to ground this study in its significance from the beginning of our discussion. Social programs generate powerful ramifications for those they directly and indirectly effect. Being a recipient of a government or non-governmental assistance program creates a ripple effect throughout affected communities which manifests itself in different levels of participation and citizenship.

Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram (1993) have helped to develop the theory that government decisions and policies communicate messages about deservingness, legitimacy, and place in society to groups targeted by, or left out of those policies. Their feedback model of political participation argues that social constructions of populations can either encourage or depress citizen participation. Two categorizations of people, “dependents” and “deviants” could be attributed to those experiencing poverty depending on the identities of people in need. While dependents are generally conceived of positively and deviants negatively, both have weak political power and policy designs reinforce this pattern of passiveness towards social policies. Widows and children have historically been conceived as passive dependents while criminals are the classic example of a deviant group, however depending on who you ask a mother on welfare could be considered a deviant and someone on parole could be considered a dependent. We shall

see whether religious leaders also use these concepts when determining how to respond to community needs.

Bruch, Ferree, and Soss (2010) push this classic theory of deservingness in their study of the participatory effects of engaging with Head Start, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and public housing programs. The authors argue that participation is connected to whether these programs, all means-tested, are paternalistic or democratic in design. They categorize a paternalistic program as one which has “a strongly hierarchical model of state authority, in which recipients are positioned as objects of official direction, surveillance, and punishment,”<sup>1</sup> while democratic programs give recipients a greater role in the decision and policy making process. A paternalistic program would be more likely to conceive of recipients as deviants or undeserving while a democratic program would be more likely to view recipients as deserving. In their study, TANF is considered paternalistic, Head Start democratic, and housing programs are somewhere in between the two categories. Bruch et al. test the effects of receiving aid from Head Start, TANF, or public housing on voting, political participation, civic participation, and general degree of engagement. The measure for voting concerned whether the respondent reported voting in the 2000 Presidential election. The variable for political participation included whether the respondent voted, participated in a political, civic, or human rights organization, or attended a political demonstration, while civic participation measured whether the respondent participated in any community or work-

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<sup>1</sup> Bruch, Sarah K., Myra Marx Ferree, and Joe Soss. "From Policy to Polity: Democracy, Paternalism, and the Incorporation of Disadvantaged Citizens." *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 2 (2010): p. 221

related groups including a religious group. The last variable, degree of engagement, combined answers to political and civic participation on a scale of participation from 0 to 2. They find that while participating in public housing programs had non-significant effects on engagement, Head Start participation had a positive effect on civic participation, while involvement with TANF had a negative effect on both political and civic participation<sup>2</sup>. Put in the terms of Schneider and Ingram, paternalistic programs like TANF portray recipients as deviants and objects of punishment while democratic programs like Head Start give recipients greater political power and thus they become accustomed to participating. In these programs, engagement rather than passivity in the political process becomes reinforced.

Theories on the effects of political messaging of policy will be central to our study, but it is also important to note other theories which emphasize the more direct ways that poverty and interactions with social service providers can affect political participation. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady (1995) developed the Civic Volunteerism Model to explain that low-income citizens have lower political participation than wealthier individuals due to lack of material resources, time, engagement, and civic skills.<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox (2001) test Verba et al.'s theory by analyzing how economic hardship, political beliefs, and interactions with government actors created variations in political participation for low income individuals

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<sup>2</sup> Bruch, et al., (2010)

<sup>3</sup> Verba, Sidney., Schlozman, Kay Lehman, and Brady, Henry E. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.



in the South Bronx, New York City. Lawless and Fox find that while yes, material factors measured by their variable of economic hardship, had an important effect on participation, interactions with social service workers also predicted levels of participation. Respondents' likelihood of voting and participating politically generally increased with their confidence in social workers, however the authors note that since "only 4% of [the] respondents thought the welfare system 'worked very well,' [...] the political learning that occurred through contact with welfare workers was often politically demobilizing."<sup>4</sup> Not only do the structures of programs send messages to recipients about what they should expect from and demand from government, but individual local providers do so as well. This is why I chose to focus my analysis on the leaders of religious institutions who in their roles often wear both hats, helping to create the structure through which programs will be administered and engaging in direct contact with recipients.

The above studies emphasize that the underlying structures of government programs and interactions with on-the-ground actors encourage participants to engage with or withdraw from politics. By investigating and comparing the motivations of religious leadership and the nature of their social programs, my study attempts to do the same for religious-based poverty alleviation and general community outreach programs. We should not make assumptions about what factors influence religious institutions and leaders to create programs to help the people around them, and without having a base

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<sup>4</sup> Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. "Political Participation of the Urban Poor." *Social Problems* 48, no. 3 (2001): p. 375

from which to study the effects of these programs, we will not be able to make arguments about the relationship between religious institutions, vulnerable communities, and their political and civic participation.

### **Section Two: Implications for Citizenship**

The idea that policies have participatory consequences for citizens has also been used by scholars who study the political consequences of the criminal justice system and the concepts of carceral and custodial citizenship. While both terms are usually applied to formerly incarcerated individuals, I believe they may also be applied to individuals participating in government poverty programs. Reuben Miller, Forrest Stuart, Vanessa Barker, and Lisa Miller (2017) define carceral citizenship as “a form of political membership that is characterized by high levels of surveillance by both state and non-state actors,” which also “entails a set of legal and extra-legal consequences and responsibilities that others [...] are entirely immune.”<sup>5</sup> Due to the means-tested and work-based nature of many welfare programs in the United States, it is fair to say those receiving assistance from these programs, like the formerly incarcerated, live in an “alternate legal reality,”<sup>6</sup> and are subject to different rules outside of the bounds of normal citizenship. TANF benefits for example, are contingent on recipients meeting federal and state work requirements. While states can set their own requirements, they are heavily influenced by federal regulations which require 50 percent of all families, and 90

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<sup>5</sup> Barker, Vanessa, and Lisa L Miller. "Introduction to the Special Issue on the State of the State." *Theoretical Criminology* 21, no. 4 (2017): p. 420

<sup>6</sup> Miller, Reuben Jonathan, Forrest Stuart, Vanessa Barker, and Miller, Lisa L. "Carceral Citizenship: Race, Rights and Responsibility in the Age of Mass Supervision." *Theoretical Criminology* 21, no. 4 (2017): p. 533

percent of two-parent families, receiving assistance to participate in “work activities” for at least 30 and 35 hours per week.<sup>7</sup> According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), there are 12 work activities which can count towards a recipient’s work hours including unsubsidized employment, subsidized employment, on-the-job training, job search and readiness assistance, community service, and vocational training.<sup>8</sup> Miller et al. also emphasize that carceral citizenship includes “collateral consequences,” which “constrain their geographic and social mobility and the expectation that they pay an ambiguously defined ‘debt to society.’”<sup>9</sup> However, they also point out that carceral citizenship also endows benefits like material goods and services reserved for them and not conventional citizens.<sup>10</sup> I would argue that these definitions would certainly apply to individuals experiencing poverty.

Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman (2010) prefer to use the term “custodial citizenship,” to describe the legal state of formerly incarcerated individuals, and how their interactions with the criminal justice system negatively affect their interactions with the greater political system. Custodial citizenship can also be applied to poor communities. Weaver and Lerman emphasize the state’s “intrusive, [and] absolute power

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<sup>7</sup> “Policy Basics: An Introduction to TANF,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 08/15/2018, accessed on 01/04/2020, p. 4 <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/7-22-10tanf2.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> “Policy Basics: An Introduction to TANF,” 08/15/2018, p. 5

<sup>9</sup> Miller, Reuben Jonathan, Forrest Stuart, Vanessa Barker, and Miller, Lisa L. “Carceral Citizenship: Race, Rights and Responsibility in the Age of Mass Supervision.” *Theoretical Criminology* 21, no. 4 (2017): p. 533

<sup>10</sup> Miller et al., (2017): p. 533

over citizens,”<sup>11</sup> in their study of custodial citizenship. They argue that “in addition to shaping perceptions of government, punitive interactions influence an individual’s perception of his or her own political standing, membership, and efficacy.”<sup>12</sup> Encounters with one aspect of the state, in their case the criminal justice system, spill over into other interactions with government and society. Rather than looking at the effects of the criminal justice system, or even the institutionalized welfare state, my study will have implications for understanding the effects that interacting with religious, non-governmental poverty programs have on those living in poverty.

Do religious leaders also emphasize work or other requirements in order for people to receive benefits from their programs or do they have a more inclusive view of who deserving recipients are? We will see that some leaders have to an extent adopted state constructions of the poor and do speak of recipients as custodial or carceral citizens while others take the position that they are not responsible for determining eligibility as the state attempts to do. While the intentions of religious leaders might be different from that of government officials, it would seem that religious organizations have not all remained immune from thinking of vulnerable communities in terms of dependents, deviants, or sub-categories of citizens. It will be interesting to see where leaders are able to find other conceptions and where they are subject to the same limits of politics.

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<sup>11</sup> Weaver, Vesla M., and Amy E. Lerman. "Political Consequences of the Carceral State." *The American Political Science Review* 104, no. 4 (2010): p. 818

<sup>12</sup> Weaver et al., (2010): p. 818

## **CHAPTER TWO: HOW THE STATE THINKS ABOUT POVERTY**

Before we attempt to analyze the ways that local religious leaders conceive of poverty we must provide a base of how scholars believe the government approaches poverty and the poor so that we may draw comparisons or contrasts between the way the state and religious leaders may think. This is important because we know that different points of view will lead to different structures of programs which as discussed above will lead to different outcomes for recipients. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the historical political context undoubtedly shapes the thoughts and actions of religious institutions and leaders who are not immune from politics. This discussion will go deeper than structures and interactions between providers and recipients to ask what actors think of when they think of poverty and people who are poor. Is poverty a personal failing, a group failing, or a failure of a system? Who is responsible for poverty and who should be responsible for alleviating it? We ask these questions now in the context of the state and we will ask them again in our ultimate analysis of religious conceptions of poverty.

### **Section One: Morality, Justice, Utility**

Barbara Stark (2009) outlines what she argues are the three main modern conceptions of poverty and poverty alleviation. The first is based on morality, the second on ideas of justice, and the third is based on the concept of utility. Each base principle leads to different understandings about how to justify helping the poor, how to enforce aid, and where the responsibility for action is placed. In the morality-based conception helping the poor is born out of a moral duty to the poor and the causes of poverty and the state's role in alleviation are not central features. Rather, the theory "assumes that

poverty is inevitable and requires ongoing remediation, compassion, and charity,”<sup>13</sup> by private individuals to address the problem. The second conception: poverty as an injustice, considers poverty to be the result of unjust laws or politics and therefore, “poverty becomes a question of rights, of claims against the responsible state,” and it is up to the poor to act and make those claims.<sup>14</sup> When poverty is conceived as a function of utility, it is a failure of institutions and harms not only the utility of the poor but of society as a whole. Therefore, addressing poverty is the state’s responsibility because it can lead to an unstable society.<sup>15</sup>

Each of these theories emphasizes the role of different actors and thus prioritizes different solutions to poverty. Because poverty is considered inevitable, the moral theory focuses its argument on the non-poor and urges them to give personal charity. The poverty as justice theory addresses the poor directly and urges them to seek enforcement of their own rights, while the utility explanation speaks to the state and argues that bureaucrats should study the problems of the poor and design programs to address the issues they find. We will see that the interviews of religious leaders concerning their community programs can all be categorized into at least one of these three camps, though they may not be mutually exclusive.

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<sup>13</sup> Stark, Barbara. "Theories of Poverty/The Poverty of Theory." *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2009, no. 2 (2009): p. 396

<sup>14</sup> Stark, (2009): p. 399

<sup>15</sup> Stark, (2009): p. 403

## Section Two: Case Studies and Additional Theories of Poverty

Rachel Rys, Barbara Tomlinson, Mary Bucholtz, and Laury Oaks (2014) examine how responsibility of poverty is discussed in public policy debates in their case study of a 2013 Tennessee State Senate Bill. The bill proposed linking the academic achievement of the children of TANF recipients to their welfare benefits. Rys et al. describe how whether people were arguing in support of the bill or in opposition to it, all actors utilized a “liability model” of poverty which “assumes an acceptable baseline norm, and then seeks to identify a single individual or group of individuals who can be seen as the direct cause of any violations of that norm (Young 2003, 2011),”<sup>16</sup> while ignoring the possibility of structural injustices as the root cause of most inequalities. Supporters of the bill focused arguments of liability on parents and children while opponents placed the blame on schools, teachers, or individual lawmakers. Echoing the definition of a justice framework, proponents of the bill also organized the welfare system according to the laws of a competitive free market, “repositioning welfare recipients as agents who must make informed choices and even compete with other parents to secure state assistance.”<sup>17</sup> This neoliberal framing of poverty puts all responsibility on a specific group and leads to proposals of punishment of that group while ignoring other root causes. These authors argue instead for a social responsibility model of poverty instead of a theory which emphasizes individual responsibility. We shall see that several of the religious leaders I

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<sup>16</sup> Rys, Rachel, Tomlinson, Barbara, Bucholtz, Mary, and Oaks, Laury. *Individual Liability and Structural Injustice: Constructing Responsibility and Punishment in Poverty Discourse*, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, (2014): p. 3

<sup>17</sup> Rys et al. (2014): p. 7

spoke to also utilized liability and neoliberal models of poverty especially when discussing direct financial aid.

Susan Moeller (1995) examines the theories of scientific philanthropy and cultural constructions of poverty in her time-series study of New York City from 1890 to 1917. Although the subject of the study is historical, Moeller's analysis is still extremely relevant today. She states that "the perception of poverty is what defines poverty,"<sup>18</sup> and focuses her analysis on cultural portrayals of the poor in society and how these portrayals shaped poverty itself through emphasizing certain individuals and solutions to poverty. Moeller argues that those in power use cultural expressions of the poor to maintain their superiority and dictate who should be helped and how. She writes:

*By their very choice of who was poor and what poverty symptoms the poor expressed, cultural entertainments suggested remedies for that poverty: widows could be given direct assistance, boys could be directed to urban playgrounds, alcoholics could be forced on the wagon, working girls could be paid higher wages, immigrants could be educated and Americanized, [and] tramps could be placed in work camps. The image-dominated and implicit discourse was self-reinforcing.<sup>19</sup>*

Who people think of when they think of the poor matters. It shapes how they think of the causes of poverty and what they think the solutions to poverty should be. We will soon analyze who the religious leaders in this study mentioned when they talked about helping the community.

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<sup>18</sup> Moeller, Susan D. "The Cultural Construction of Urban Poverty: Images of Poverty in New York City, 1890–1917." *Journal of American Culture* 18, no. 4 (1995): p. 1

<sup>19</sup> Moeller, (1995): p. 4



Moeller also gives the concept of “scientific philanthropy” some thought in her paper. Scientific philanthropy emphasizes the role one’s environment plays in one’s poverty. Scientific philanthropists argue that “once environmental obstacles to self-improvement [are] removed, only those members of the poor who [suffer] from a degenerate heredity [will] remain degraded.”<sup>20</sup> Again, this theory would suggest a very specific program to deal with poverty, one which addresses apparent environmental issues such as housing but might leave deeper problems such as job training or structural racism to the individual. A similar argument is made by some economists who argue that longer term poverty is due to individual heterogeneity.

Essentially, the theory goes that people who have the ability to leave poverty quickly do, and those who are left simply do not have that ability to do so and that fact may not change. This differs from the concept of state dependence which says that it is not individual characteristics that make it harder for some people to exit poverty, but, it is simply harder to exit the longer you have been in poverty. The two theories generate very different policy results. If one believes in individual heterogeneity then one would propose a policy of late intervention so the state will not waste resources on the poor who you believe can and will exit poverty on their own. State dependence theorists would prefer a policy of early intervention to prevent people from getting stuck in poverty through no fault of their own.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Moeller, (1995): p. 3

<sup>21</sup> Lang, Kevin. *Poverty and Discrimination*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007.

## **CHAPTER THREE: CASE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS SOCIAL PROGRAMS**

### **Section One: Research Study and Methods**

We have seen that scholars have focused on what factors influence the government to care about the poor, but non-governmental agencies have long been instrumental in the fight against poverty and thus must be analyzed with equal rigor. This study will be a qualitative examination of seven religious institutions in the Greater Boston Area and their senior leadership. I have conducted in-depth interviews with the leaders of these institutions in order to discover what motivates these leaders to provide services to the communities around them. I have chosen to conduct a case study of religious leaders because they supervise these programs and provide a unique perspective on their communities and religious traditions. I believe that a qualitative case study is a useful method for answering my question of what makes religious social programs different from secular state programs because using a complex method allows me to analyze complex questions about the innermost workings of these institutions and how they relate to historical conceptions and politics of poverty. While less generalizable, case studies allow us to go deeper in our analysis in ways that might not be possible using other methods. I began these interviews with a specific set of questions which guided me through the discussions, but as can be seen, all of the interviews followed unique paths. My questions were meant to center the conversation around programs to aid the poor and vulnerable, but in my last interview we actually discussed the poor very little

directly. Through my questions and conversations, I was able to understand a larger and deeper picture about how these leaders see their role in society.

I chose the following institutions on the basis of their theological, geographic, and demographic diversity. In the order of how the interviews were conducted, the organizations were: The Islamic Society of Boston (ISBCC), the largest Mosque in New England; First Church in Cambridge, a member of the United Church of Christ (UCC) denomination; Park Street Church, a Conservative Congregational Christian (CCC) church; Temple Israel, the largest Reform Synagogue in New England; Saint Cecilia Parish, which has a largely liberal Roman Catholic congregation; Trinity Church, an Episcopal church; and Saint Katharine Drexel, a majority African American Roman Catholic parish. Through these interviews, we will attempt to see how different religious leaders think about the poor, and the causes of and solutions to poverty. It is important to form an understanding for where these leaders are coming from so that future studies can later effectively analyze the consequences of the messages they are sending to their recipients and the effect these messages have on society.

Interviews were from 20 to 45 minutes long simply depending on how much each religious leader had to say in response to the following question outline:

1. As a representative of [church/mosque/synagogue] could you briefly describe the programs you offer to aid people in the community?
2. Could you give me a history of these programs, when did they start, what were the original goals in starting them? Have the goals or the programs changed over time? Do congregants become involved in the programs?
3. Who are the programs open to and how is that decided?

4. Does [church/mosque/synagogue] partner with different organizations or actors, religious or otherwise, to help those in need?
5. Is [church/mosque/synagogue]'s approach to community service related to the principles of [religion/denomination]? Does [religion/denomination] have any unique understanding of or approaches to outreach to the communities you serve?
6. Is there anything [church/mosque/synagogue] would change about the relationship between the government or religious institutions and people experiencing poverty?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about how [church/mosque/synagogue] views poverty, the poor, or its role in the community in general?

These questions were meant to get a feel for what communities these organizations chose to focus their outreach on and why. As discussed above, the leaders I spoke to often did not use the term “poor” but the conversations which came from these questions still help us answer how religious leaders conceive of serving vulnerable communities differently than the traditional state does. Why do religious organizations choose to give aid to their communities? If the hungry, homeless, or children were a main focus of programs, why them?

In the next sections we will examine how the religious leaders I interviewed conceived of their outreach to the poor or other vulnerable populations and how these points of view fit into the already defined conceptions of poverty. We will focus on the three theories outlined earlier: morality, justice, and utility. Again, a moral conception of poverty sees poverty as inevitable and sees poverty alleviation as the moral duty of those who are not suffering. This theme is perhaps the most invoked in my discussions with these religious leaders. In the second theory, poverty is considered an injustice but its alleviation is largely left to those who are affected directly by these injustices. The third

conception is one where poverty is a societal failing of utility, and so the burden is placed on institutions to find solutions to the problems society created. In addition to these three traditional conceptions, I will add two new conceptions which I feel add unique dimensions to religious conceptions of poverty. I define these two conceptions as “poverty as salvation” and “humanistic poverty.” I will go into greater depth for these definitions in the discussion below. Briefly, poverty as salvation conceives of service as an integral step towards an individual’s spiritual salvation. In this conception, the poor themselves are not emphasized as much as in morality or justice poverty and the focus is on the spiritual journey of the individual serving the poor. I separate the humanistic conception from the others because while it focuses on the poor, it gives little notice towards solving poverty itself. Instead the church which led to this new definition concentrates their work on bringing humanity and dignity back into the community and those experiencing poverty. The case studies following should make these definitions more understandable; below is a chart breaking down the different conceptions.

	<i><b>Morality</b></i>	<i><b>Justice</b></i>	<i><b>Utility</b></i>	<i><b>Humanistic</b></i>	<i><b>Salvation</b></i>
<b>Cause of Poverty</b>	Poverty is inevitable	Unjust laws	Society and institutions	Cause is not central	Cause is not central
<b>Focus of Action</b>	Non-poor individuals	The poor themselves	The state; who has benefited	The community	Spirituality of the non-poor
<b>Markers</b>	One must do what one can to help	Work and individual choice	Society as a whole must make amends	Dignity of the struggling	Service is a path to God

**Table 1. Conceptions of Poverty Seen in Case Studies**

I chose to structure the following discussion in terms of these categorizations of poverty because I believe it is the best way for readers to understand how the religious leaders spoke about their programs and those they serve. In order to identify when my subjects were speaking in a certain conception I focused on where they placed the responsibility for action and the nature of their programs because I found the leaders did not always speak about the specific causes of poverty. The focus of action is where I was especially able to distinguish between the different conceptions. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that none of these cases fits solely or perfectly into one category, instead conversations moved from one to another very easily so I would not argue that these categories are mutually exclusive. In the discussion below, I attempt to demonstrate both the nuance and where religious leaders clearly diverged from one another. While I give each organization a unique section it is true that they largely fall between categories. In particular I found themes of morality throughout all the conversations though in some morality was discussed in conjunction with one of the other themes.

### **Section Two: Poverty as Morality**

I would put my conversations with representatives of ISBCC, Temple Israel, and Saint Cecilia Parish in the morality camp because all three emphasized the responsibility of the congregation to help vulnerable populations through direct community aid above other aspects of poverty alleviation.

*The Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC)*

*So conceptually, how do we see poverty? [...] Yes, there is a correlation between effort and earning, but at the same time, ultimately*

*it is God who decides how much you are going to own. And those who are being tested in this life by not earning enough, they are the responsibility of the community to take care of.*

ISBCC is the largest Mosque in New England, located just outside of central Boston in Roxbury Massachusetts. I had the opportunity to meet with their Chief Executive Officer Wael Alkhairo. Although Mr. Alkhairo explained that ISBCC outsources most of their poverty and community service to organizations like the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) and Muslim Community Support Services (MCSS), he was able to give me insights into the Islamic perception of poverty as seen by his institution.

MCSS and ICNA work in partnership with ISBCC to provide services such as food distribution, transitional housing assistance, health clinics, and financial assistance. Malika MacDonald, the director of ICNA Relief's New England field office and National Director for transitional housing explained that anyone in need is generally eligible for programs but for direct financial assistance and food pantries the organization does require income verifications.

When asked about Islam's approach to poverty, Mr. Alkhairo emphasized that above all helping those in need is the community's responsibility and that in Islam this is achieved partly through two forms of charitable giving: zakat and sadaqah. Mr. Alkhairo defines zakat, the obligatory act of charity by all Muslims, as a "purification of wealth" and sadaqah, the voluntary act of charity, as "an affirmation of faith." He describes zakat as the institutionalization of the responsibility of the community towards the needy while sadaqah is more spiritual. Concerning sadaqah, Mr. Alkhairo stated, "If you want to come

closer to God, to the Creator, then you give sadaqah, and that sadaqah is going to the poor. In essence, you are saying that if I help the poor and needy then I am going to grow spiritually.”

Both Mr. Alkhairo and Ms. MacDonald emphasized that Muslims view serving neighbors as an obligation, and Mr. Alkhairo stated additionally that most of the recipients ISBCC helps come from within their own community. From this point of view, the practice of zakat easily falls into the poverty as morality theme. Poverty is largely predetermined according to Mr. Alkhairo and it is overwhelmingly the responsibility of the community to overcome. However, sadaqah is our first indication that something outside of the three traditional conceptions motivates religious institutions and individuals to help vulnerable communities. That sadaqah is understood as a way to affirm one’s faith in God can also put ISBCC in the ‘poverty as salvation’ camp. The idea that one helps others to enhance one’s own spirituality is something that we will come back to in several of the Christian organizations as well.

### *Temple Israel*

*So that idea of, if you have you have to provide for the have-nots, is a huge piece of Jewish tradition. You know, the most common commandment through the Torah is to take care of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger and what those three represent are the most vulnerable members of your community [...] It’s really an essential piece of our identity, to take that check, take that soul-searching to see where we are plentiful and where we can spread that wealth as a way to make our world a better place.*



Temple Israel is the largest Reform Synagogue in New England and has historically had many community programs to feed the hungry and serve the vulnerable. It is located in the Longwood downtown area of Boston. Generally, Temple Israel has focused its outreach largely on the hungry through a program called Saturday, Sunday Bread Fund and a partnership with the Boston Food Bank both of which continue today. Temple leadership also places a great emphasis on the community coming together and organizing as evidenced by the many initiatives congregants can be a part of including the Racial Justice Initiative, the Green Team, and TI Cares whose mission is to connect members through kindness during times of celebration and challenge. According to Rabbi Dan Slipakoff, the Temple is currently in a moment of transition, attempting to balance direct service and more institutional social activism.

The above quotation reaches into several themes we have covered. First, it seems that Temple Israel conceives of the poor as dependents. Rabbi Slipakoff explains that the widow and the orphan are significant because they would not have had access to land in a traditional agricultural society and so they would not have had access to their own food production. The idea that those in need are innocent dependents plays directly into the moral conception of poverty alleviation. Rabbi Slipakoff emphasized that feeding the hungry was historically a hands-on experience that congregants could take part in and that justice and the idea of repairing the world are essential aspects of Reform Judaism. He also spoke about several forms of outreach that Temple Israel conducts through its youth programs to teach the children in their community these principles of justice and restoration of the world.

*Saint Cecilia Parish*

*The Eucharist ends with missioning, that's where the word 'mass' comes from, 'you are sent,' that's the whole point of the Eucharist, the Eucharist doesn't just end after an hour on a Sunday, but the Eucharist continues as you go and minister to the world. [...] So hopefully that is what we're compelled to do, is to service. Greater service and deeper love, every Sunday, every time we walk into a church and celebrate mass together, we reconcile with each other, we learn to love one another in a way that God loves us, and then we go out and bring that love to the world.*

Saint Cecilia is a large Roman Catholic parish in the Back Bay area of Boston. They are a relatively diverse congregation in age and race and the church has several programs dedicated to serving the homeless, hungry, and elderly or sick. I spoke with Deacon Billy Biegler who runs the church's Ministry to the Sick and to the Homebound, called Saint Cecilia CARES. In this program ministers visit the homes of those who are sick or isolated and build relationships with those who are too often invisible to the general community. Saint Cecilia's Homelessness and Hunger Ministry is run by a parishioner of the church whose main role is to coordinate donations and services between parishioners and agencies around Boston such as shelters and food pantries. Deacon Biegler explained that Saint Cecilia's ministries are born out of a need that parishioners see in their community as well as connected to traditional Catholic teachings. Deacon Biegler explains that Catholic Social Teaching defines poverty as "a moral evil" and reinforces that the church must preference the poor because "we recognize them as having a special place in the eyes of God."

The context of environment is something that many of the leaders brought up. Deacon Biegler attributes the success that the church has had with housing and elderly outreach to the environment around them saying, “look at our neighborhood, we’ve got a bunch of hospitals, we have a bunch of people who are getting priced out of housing, and we have a bunch of old people who nobody notices exists in the neighborhood who never leave their apartments, and all of those communities we have done a great job of reaching out to them.”

A final point that Deacon Biegler brought up which helps me put Saint Cecilia in the moral framework of poverty is his assertion that it is not the church’s job to determine who is truly needy. He says that to be approved for government assistance, “I feel like you have to prove yourself of incapable of working,” but “the church doesn’t ask why you’re poor. The church isn’t going to sit there and say you know ‘prove to me why you are poor’ [...] If somebody says they’re in need, my job is to give. It is not to determine the need.” This belief that those in need are always deserving of help without judgement is I would argue a central feature of the moral construction of poverty. As is the idea that it is one’s personal duty to help.

This is in contrast to the poverty as justice theory which emphasizes that it is the poor person who must pull themselves up and prove that they deserve justice. This conception has historically been common with opponents of social welfare policy. In this study, there was one church in particular which could be placed at least partially in this mold.

## Section Two: Poverty as Morality and Justice

### *Park Street Church*

*Every person out there, it's a multi-layered problem, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and even a lot of money won't solve it. People are broken, and part of that brokenness, is grounded, is based in their own decisions that you can't control. And they repeat those bad decisions. [...] We're not a hand-out organization, we're a relationship organization, that's attempting to care for their soul. And we take that seriously, because we believe they are human beings, made in the image of God.*

The interview with Park Street Church was a combination of strong spiritual and moral connection to helping the poor with a traditional conservative conception of poverty as individual failure and justice. Park Street Church is located just across from the Boston Commons where many homeless individuals often gather. I spoke with Assistant Minister Michael Balboni who began by telling me of their Thursday Night Outreach ministry which consists of going out into the Commons and downtown Boston to distribute food, clothing, and other basic needs to people experiencing homelessness. Minister Balboni described this outreach as a step the church takes in order to identify people who might have the potential to be helped further financially. The Minister emphasized that the goal is to “meet our neighbors, care for them, know them by name, and look for ways that we can lend practical assistance.” The desire to help those in need was directly tied to the notion, which other leaders also referenced, that when you serve the poor you are serving God himself. Minister Balboni reflected on the Bible saying, “the way we respond to the poor, we honor them as if we are receiving Christ. So, it's a

deep spirit of hospitality in which we show kindness and compassion to strangers. Recognizing that the stranger represents Jesus himself.” While the spiritual nature of aiding the community is central to the motivations of Park Street Church and reflects a moral dimension of poverty alleviation, the discussion was also full of conceptions of justice, the deviancy of the poor, and the idea that there are some people who the church cannot help because they do not want help.

Minister Balboni told several stories during the interview of couples who the church had given direct financial aid for rent or other services who despite the aid were in his view, unwilling to get work and care for themselves. One can hear the frustration in the Minister’s story about one particular couple:

*We wanted to help them but there was trauma in their lives, in her life in particular, unaddressed trauma, untreated depression, and it’s just the complexity of the problems that are there, and he was just unwilling to work. Capable, but just jumps from job to job to job, can’t hold a job, sitting right where you’re sitting, and me pleading with him to stay in the job, and just unwilling to do it. For reasons, I don’t understand. But willing to stay home and watch TV all day.*

The above quotation is quite similar to what one would find in studies of the negative messages received by people on welfare from welfare case workers or government officials. Despite coming from a different background, with deep sincere spiritual motivations for helping those in need, it would seem that Park Street Church has internalized the justice-based conception of poverty. In this view, yes, there are unjust systems and policies in place that create poverty, but ultimately it is up to the poor individual to demand justice and to be worthy of that justice.

### Section Three: Poverty as Utility

#### *Saint Katharine Drexel*

*We need the church as a whole to voice the insidious and sinful nature of racism so that people will take it more seriously. [...] The church is a product of its local surroundings, and people are a product of their environment, so whatever you are going to find in the environment as whole, you're going to find in any of our churches, not just the Catholic Church but any of these houses of worship. People's mentalities, we're formed by the whole of our society.*

Saint Katharine Drexel was the most unique interview of the case studies because poverty was barely mentioned. As I discussed in the introduction to my project, I took this difference as an opportunity to understand the church in a more intimate way rather than attempting to steer the conversation in a predetermined direction. Saint Katharine Drexel is a Roman Catholic Church like Saint Cecilia, but it is a majority African American congregation in a completely different context as expressed to me by Reverend Oscar Pratt, the Administrator of the church. The church helps operate two food pantries in the community but the issue at the forefront of Reverend Pratt's mind when I asked him about community outreach was racism and race relations in the church and in the community at large. Even though poverty was not specifically emphasized in our conversation, I still argue that the utility theme of poverty applies to the Reverend's framing of his church's mission and activism. In Stark's conception of poverty as utility, poverty is described as failure of institutions to care for society as a whole. The consequences of poverty are not just borne on the poor but on society in general, and the burden for fixing these injustices is placed not on any individuals but on the institutions

that created the problems. When an issue is conceived in terms of utility, no one group of individuals can undo the wrongs, it is a system failure and so a system must be rebuilt to rectify the situation. Reverend Pratt's description of race as a key issue for his church certainly takes this approach. The Reverend explained:

*Right now, we see as a part of our mission, helping to raise the conscious, a need for the church as a whole to address this. And it's one of those things, racism is not a Black issue. Black folks, I guarantee did not start that, none of us said 'How many folks want a free boat ride?' That was not us. So, fixing it is not going to come from us. You have to change the hearts and minds of people who are beneficiaries of the system.*

Reverend Pratt also spoke more on the power of the church to act if it can simply implement what it says in writing, even going so far as to say that sometimes leadership needs to get out of the way and understand that not everyone comes with the same ideas, stories and experiences and that it is easier to do good when “you empower people to do what they're baptized, what they're called to do, what they've been empowered to do,” and only then will you have something that will reach beyond the church to the community at large. For these reasons, Saint Katharine Drexel is directing their main mission to the Catholic Church itself, and bringing these systemic issues to the forefront of a systemic institution in order to address racial problems in the country as a whole. According to Reverend Pratt, is not their job to solve alone, institutions need to be aware of their failings and change.

## Section Four: Humanistic Poverty

### *First Church Cambridge*

*People are welcome to come to the Café no matter where they are economically, addiction wise, mental health wise, all of that stuff, personality struggles, all of those things that can be complicating in a human life, we just kind of mush it all together and say “Here, we’re just all people,” and it’s actually really cool. It works really well.*

First Church Cambridge, a member of the United Church of Christ (UCC) did not easily fit into one of three categories of poverty conceptions so I have created a new categorization for First Church. This humanistic conception is community based like moral poverty but focused more on communal relationship building rather than direct aid to the poor from individuals. Kate Layzer, Minister of Street Outreach at First Church approaches issues of poverty and homelessness from this perspective, choosing not to focus on the material aspects of poverty but the personal and communal consequences. First Church operates many homelessness ministries including an in-house transitional shelter for homeless men and a program called Solutions at Work which provides employment counseling and similar services to homeless people searching for employment. Minister Layzer specifically emphasized that her program, the Friday Café, is not a problem-solving program, but one who’s goals are relationship and community building. On Fridays at First Church everyone is welcome to come and share a meal prepared by volunteers who also gather with guests to eat once the meal is served. Minister Layzer calls her approach “radical hospitality” and says that the ultimate goal is



just to restore dignity and humanity to guests who live on the margins of society. She says,

*What guests say to us is: "When I come here, I remember what it feels like to be human," and that's just one of the tragedies of homelessness, it's just immediately dehumanizing in many ways, both the way you're treated, the way you feel about yourself, the living conditions, you know just trying to get a shower once a day. And we just try to be available to chat with people, whether they just want to talk about the Red Sox or politics or whether they want to tell us what they're week's like or what they're going through.*

This approach acknowledges the institutionalized systems that lead to poverty and homelessness but does not make them a priority when interreacting with vulnerable populations. The goal is not to fix the problem with financial assistance but to bring people back into the community and bring community members together, making sure that those in need feel like they are a part of a community that sees them.

Furthermore, although Minister Layzer does see the program as a religious activity for her congregation and herself, religion is not a feature of the program. She says, "if a guest wants to talk about faith, then I'll sit down and we can talk about faith, but I will not come to them and say "Now, how is it with your soul," you know, "Have you prayed this week?" you know I don't do that." Recall how Minister Balboni compared serving the poor to serving Jesus; Minister Layzer takes those same teachings but uses them in a different way:

*They say you should see Christ in your neighbor, but I wouldn't want to look at my neighbor and see Christ instead of that person, instead I would want to have that same feeling of openness, that just as I open to*

*the mystery of Christ, and it's not up to me to tell God who God is, similarly I want to be open to my neighbor, and to have a kind of radical hospitality towards every person who comes in. That to me is transformation.*

Rather than superimposing one's spiritual goals onto service, at First Church the emphasis is put on the service itself and on the people that are being served. The act of breaking bread and opening one's heart to the other person and recognizing them as a fellow community member is central to the mission of First Church. I argue that this is a more universalist approach to community service and one that is distinct from moral, judicial or utilitarian approaches because of its more holistic nature and lack of emphasis on "solving" poverty.

I did not have the opportunity to speak to the Minister who runs the First Church Shelter or the individual who organizations Solutions at Work. If I had been able to connect to more leadership at First Church I would have received a different impression of First Church's mission. The mission of Solutions at Work for instance presumably would have emphasized problem solving more than the Friday Café does. However, speaking to Minister Layzer still gives us a new point of view from which to study the relationship churches have with the vulnerable communities they serve. Not all programs necessarily have to focus on specific causes or solutions to poverty, though many organizations chose to go in that direction. There is something to be said for programs that simply provide a safe space for those who are often ignored by society to come together with others and spend time together as equal members of a shared community.

## Section Five: Poverty as Salvation

### *Trinity Church*

*It's interesting, people do this kind of volunteer work for all kinds of reasons, and they're all good reasons. [...] Mature faith, is when people say, "I need to be doing this. For my own salvation." [...] So we, in other words, it's a funny contradiction, and it's a point often missed about churches, you know we're not simply here to do good, we're here to save our own souls in a way.*

For the final case study, I would like to return to something that was first mentioned in the discussion of ISBCC's approach to community service as well as in my conversations with Part Street Church and Saint Cecilia Parish: the idea that helping the needy brings one closer to God. I will be using Trinity Church as the example for this motivation for aid because it was expressed so clearly by Reverend Patrick Ward.

Trinity is a large Episcopal Church located in the center of Boston in Copley Square. Trinity administers several community programs aimed at poverty, hunger, education, and social justice. The church partners with several shelters and food pantries around Boston to help serve food and help place people in shelters. They also participate in College Behind Bars and run several other mentorship programs. Reverend Ward emphasized that programs and ministries must stem from the energy in the church and the community around them, but he also reflected on what people's underlying motivations should be for service. The quotation above sums up the idea that one should approach service as a way to deepen your personal connection to God. Reverend Ward explains that this deeper motivation is what makes churches different from secular service

programs. Yes, a religious person is serving food at a soup kitchen to help the hungry or the wider world, but they may also be serving themselves.

Though this motivation was alluded to by several of the religious leaders I spoke to, it has not been studied by scholars interested in social programs. Even in the moral and utilitarian conceptions of poverty that we have used as leading categories there is no sense that one helps the poor to also help themselves. This is a fascinating idea that should be studied further. Religious communities conduct an abundance of service for people who are struggling, even secular organizations are often run by religious individuals. I would argue that the motivations of administrators have important effects even if on the surface programs look the same. Rational choice theorists often argue that people act in ways that benefit themselves and weigh personal costs and benefits of actions. Does helping others for personal reasons make one work harder in service? My conversation with Reverend Ward perhaps suggests that the answer might be yes.

### **Section Six: Thoughts on the Separation of Church and State**

Beyond looking to analyze the ways that church leaders relate to the people they serve, I also wanted to gauge feelings towards state programs or institutions in general. I received varying responses which should be noted if we would like to consider what it might mean for religious institutions and the government to work more closely on important social issues. These thoughts were in response to my question on the relationships between the government, religious institutions, and people experiencing hardship.

Mr. Wael of ISBCC reflected that it should be everyone's role to care for the community but that the government, as it is more institutionalized, might find it easier to institute and execute social programs, saying that "government has the power to excise taxes, and make sure that the vulnerable, the needy, and the weak are supported in the community." The state has more authority to institutionalize charity. For instance, Mr. Wael explains that while the practice of zakat is considered obligatory no one is actually forced to give a percentage of their income to the needy, one's conscious is the authority there. However, he also acknowledged that some might argue that the church is more effective because it is easier to directly give aid through churches because of government bureaucracy and greater administrative costs of the state.

Minister Layzer of First Church referenced the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) as a way that the church is involved in activism and explained that there is not a strict separation between First Church and the state in terms of their service especially in relation to the shelter they operate. Rabbi Slipakoff of Temple Israel, Reverend Pratt of Saint Katharine Drexel, and Reverend Ward of Trinity Church also singled out GBIO as a way that their organization affects policy and change in the communities around them. According to their website, GBIO's mission is to "build power by developing local leaders so we can act together on issues that matter to our communities."<sup>22</sup> Founded in 1998, GBIO consists of 41 membership congregations in the Greater Boston Area committed to organizing people across different identities. Because they were mentioned so frequently, I very much wanted to speak to a representative of

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<sup>22</sup> Our Mission, *Greater Boston Interfaith Organization*, <https://www.gbio.org/>

GBIO for their organization's perspective on religion and community activism, however after several attempts I was unfortunately not able to connect with anyone at the organization. A future study could focus on these umbrella organizations rather than individual congregations.

I have already discussed parts of Saint Cecilia Parish's perspective on the difference between church and state in their section above. Deacon Biegler sees the church's role to be less of a judge in determining need and merely as a provider and a believer of the people the church serves. He also argues that the church is by nature political in that faith informs political conscious but that the more churches can stay out of the civic arena the better because of the very real power they have over people's opinions. In this, Deacon Biegler addressed the Catholic Church's controversial history with clericalism saying, "I agree that we have to gauge the moral compass of people but when the church steps in and says "If you are a Catholic you must vote this way," I think it's really dangerous, and it makes me sad and nauseous all at once. I think, that is an abuse of our power."

It is interesting to compare this with the other Catholic church I spoke to, Saint Katharine Drexel. Reverend Pratt brought a nuanced perspective saying that though as a church leader he is not supposed to tell people who to vote for, the church's leadership does let local priests know who they want people to lean towards. Furthermore, Reverend Pratt also brings in the perspective of the history of political activism in Black churches in America, saying "the Black Christian church going back to the earliest days of this country, when they would form themselves, they have always been political." So, there is

certainly more to consider than simply having the desire to refrain from imposing one's views on a congregation. Even more clearly setting his church apart from the others studied, Reverend Pratt says that the church's main purpose and goal should be to challenge the system:

*The concept of separation of church and state is not that the church cannot speak to the state, the state can't speak to the church, it's that the state will not create a state church. But that does not mean that as church we cannot speak to our government to hold them accountable, to hold them to certain standards. It's not in Christian teaching, it's not in any of the teachings of any of the religions that I'm aware of that says you can cage children and do that in the name of an entire nation, of an entire society.*

The Reverend speaks of systems of injustices that “you have got to destroy,” setting a different tone from most of the other leaders I spoke to in terms of the imperative that churches have to hold the state accountable for what it does on behalf of its people. Reverend Pratt emphasized that churches should work with the government to help communities whenever possible but ultimately, the church should be a check on the state.

Reverend Ward of Trinity Church and Minister Balboni at Park Street Church were more hesitant about connecting church and state so closely. Though Reverend Ward did speak of activism that Trinity congregants have taken part in with GBIO and also on their own concerning problems of gun violence, he was also careful to specify that churches are not social service organizations though they are often assumed to be. He explained how the term “faith-based solutions” always rubbed him the wrong way

because, “some of these problems are so huge and on such a scale that it takes the federal government to address them in a cohesive way, [...] [so] to say the church is responsible for fixing [them] I think is abominable.” He also explains that often people look to the church to manage crises in people’s lives, but that these problems often fall beyond a church’s core function and ability. Minister Balboni also expressed the fact that sometimes the church simply doesn’t have the expertise to deal with complex issues as well as a frustration with the suspicions the government seems to have towards religious based programs due to the missionary aspect of their work, but that for Park Street Church you cannot have one without the other. Minister Balboni explains:

*I think a part of the lack of openness [of the government towards churches] is because they see religious organizations using taxpayers’ funds to proselytize and advance their own spiritual mission, and from my vantage point, there’s no way, we can’t just do handouts and not talk about the soul. It’s body and soul together. Our theology demands that they go together.*

For all the religious leaders, there are clear differences between government and church function and ability but they varied in levels of optimism or pessimism related to whether collaboration is possible or necessary. Saint Katharine Drexel’s ministry appears to be inherently political, not in the sense that Reverend Pratt tells people how to vote, but in the sense that the church has a role to play in the morality of the nation and keeping the government accountable to society. For the others, either because doing so is antithetical to theology or merely for practical reasons, the church’s role is mainly centered around helping those in their direct community rather than specifically challenging structures and norms.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS ON THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS CONCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE**

Do religious leaders think of the poor in the same ways that political scientists have argued that government officials do? We have seen that some religious leaders do conceive of the poor or vulnerable in familiar ways. In particular they may think of service in terms of morality, of poverty as a question of justice and rights, or as a problem of society as a whole. Furthermore, the conceptions these leaders came with shaped who and how they decided to serve their community.

All of the churches I studied had programs to feed the hungry, most also organized homelessness outreach or partnered with various shelters in Boston, Park Street Church emphasized direct financial aid, the elderly and LGBTQ+ populations were also highlighted by Saint Cecilia's leadership, Temple Israel, Trinity Church, and Saint Katharine Drexel pointed my attention towards education programs and social justice activism. Mr. Wael of ISBCC and Rabbi Slipakoff even used the same term of sadaqah in their discussion of serving the needy. Some organizations required that recipients of aid show proof of need and others administered programs which were open universally. All the leaders I spoke to noted that most if not all of their outreach to the community comes from congregants who see a need in the environment around them.

Some saw service as the responsibility of those who are privileged in the community towards those who are struggling. Others while coming with similar

intentions also placed responsibility on the struggling individuals themselves and this was reflected in their framing of personal choice in connection with poverty. The above are all consistent with ways that scholars have studied secular poverty conceptions and programs. This study also found additional approaches to poverty, mainly one focusing on the humanistic spirit of community, and another which focused on personal spiritual gain as motivation for service. The latter is particularly fascinating in terms of its effects on service and opportunities for future studies. In some areas, differing conceptions of poverty did lead to contrasting programs. In other areas even if leaders expressed divergent conceptions or motivations, the resulting programs could be similar in practice.

I argue that church based social programs should be studied by political scientists because they are a constant feature of communities since their inception before the modern welfare state. Churches, especially large ones have vast financial resources as well as man-power. They have incredible influence in their communities and even if some do not see a path in partnership with the state, others are ready and willing to collaborate where they can to serve common goals. Spirituality is alive and well in this country and it motivates individuals to act in ways that can be used to the benefit of all.

I began with the consequences of the messages that policies, administrators of social services, and the state send towards those experiencing poverty. Government messages about the poor affect their political participation, relationship to the state, and even their sense of citizenship. We know this, but we

do not know much about messages that marginalized groups receive from other societal actors who also provide social services. With this study we are one step closer to discovering how religious-based community service programs affect the people they serve. We have seen that the motivations of religious leaders vary greatly even within denomination and that furthermore, they cannot be easily categorized into preexisting groups. Returning to the consequences of policy and participatory messages, further studies should attempt to understand the perceptions that those served have of religious based programs and their administrative leadership.

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**CURRICULUM VITAE**

