Religion and Social Welfare in Indianapolis, 1929–2002

a public charity

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A PUBLIC CHARITY
For Peter
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A PUBLIC CHARITY
INTRODUCTION

In 1938, a girl pregnant with her first child arrived at Indianapolis’s Suemma Coleman Home for unmarried mothers. When the women running the home learned that the girl was Catholic, they quickly contacted St. Elizabeth’s Home, the city’s Catholic home for unwed mothers. Although the Suemma Coleman Home was not an official Protestant institution, the city’s social workers had long accepted that the Coleman Home would serve Protestant girls, St. Elizabeth’s the city’s Catholic girls, and the Jewish Family Service Society Indianapolis’s Jewish girls. A clear religious division of labor defined maternity home care.¹

In 1992, when Stephen Goldsmith became mayor of Indianapolis, he initiated a restructuring of city government to privatize public services and encourage “public-private partnerships.” He called upon city churches to address social problems. His most visible initiative, the Front Porch Alliance, encouraged clergy and their parishioners to take responsibility for the social ills plaguing neighborhoods. In justifying his outreach to religious institutions, Goldsmith claimed they had previously played an important role in the city and that it was the rise of the “big government systems such as welfare” that had “marginalized” them.²

Although Goldsmith’s assertion about the historic role of religious organizations in the city’s social welfare system was correct, his contention that the welfare state had “marginalized” them was erroneous. The relationship between public and private social welfare agencies has been much more complex. Certainly since the New Deal of the 1930s, government authorities have assumed greater responsibility for social welfare. However, the expansion of public programs did not always result in the withering of private ones. Rather than compete with the private sector, public authorities in Indianapolis—who were fiscally conservative—often turned to private institutions, including religiously affiliated ones, to sup-
plement the services offered by public agencies and in some cases to administer publicly financed programs.

Using the New Deal, the War on Poverty, and the recent turn to faith-based organizations as benchmarks, I explore the relationship between religion and social welfare in Indianapolis within a national context. I evaluate the extent to which Indianapolis participated in or resisted the trajectory of national social welfare trends, highlighting three questions. First, what role have religious organizations played within the city’s larger social welfare matrix, both its public and private sectors? Second, how have the more general relations between the public and private sectors evolved? And third, how have notions of citizenship affected the delivery of social services? The answers to these questions reveal that in Indianapolis, religious boundaries helped define social services both when the welfare state expanded its responsibility and when it devolved authority to private citizens.

In the last two decades social welfare historians have discussed in detail the emergence of the welfare state, examining how and why the state emerged as the central actor. Much of this work focuses, rightly so, on the 1930s, when the New Deal’s Social Security Act established Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and on the 1960s, when the Great Society introduced such initiatives as Medicare, Medicaid, and the Community Action Program. We now know a great deal about the development of policy at the national level, and we continue to learn more about the delivery of services locally. Studies that focus on gender and race have been especially helpful in deepening our understanding of the values and assumptions that have structured the American welfare state. Less well understood is what relationship public authorities had with private social welfare organizations. Because public agencies provided considerably more material assistance and grew at a much faster rate than private agencies, it might seem unnecessary to consider the relations between these two sectors. There are, however, a number of historians who argue that public programs should not be examined in isolation from the private sector because historically, the line dividing the two has been far from clear, particularly
in the late twentieth century. Michael Katz, for instance, insists that an examination of the “blurred boundaries” between public and private social welfare will illuminate the practical and ideological underpinnings of America’s “semiwelfare state.” Such a focus clarifies how public resources have never been sufficient, and how aid continues to be cast as a charitable endeavor rather than a right of citizenship.

Theda Skocpol suggests that these “blurred boundaries” challenge those who believe that the welfare state has displaced voluntary activity. She shows that voluntary activity and associations have expanded rather than contracted since the state took on a greater role in social welfare. Skocpol points to the post–World War II era, when the American Legion both championed and benefited from the GI Bill, which provided generous social programs to returning soldiers. She concludes: “Far from public social provision and voluntarism being opposed to one another, as today conservatives so loudly claim, they have actually flourished in full symbiosis.”

Political scientists and policy studies scholars have provided further insight into these blurred boundaries on the national level. Focusing on the period following 1967—when the U.S. Congress amended the Social Security Act to encourage the states to channel public funds to private social welfare organizations—researchers from these fields have documented the many linkages between the public and nonprofit sectors and discussed in depth the impact that the federal budget cuts of the 1980s had on the nonprofit sector. Although most of this scholarship investigates secular rather than religious nonprofits, it nonetheless reveals the interdependence of government and private agencies.

Two recent events have compelled scholars to consider the role of religious nonprofits in public initiatives. First, in 1996 the U.S. Congress, revamping the nation’s social welfare system, abolished the New Deal program Aid to Families with Dependent Children and passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which through its Charitable Choice provision allows religious congregations to apply for federal social welfare funding. While religious nonprofits had long had access to public monies, never before had congregations been permitted to receive federal money directly.
Second, in one of his first measures as president, George W. Bush acted on the Charitable Choice provision and announced his faith-based initiative to encourage churches to apply for federal social welfare funds to support a wide range of services from job training to drug rehabilitation.

While legal scholars, in response to these developments, have investigated the constitutional implications for the First Amendment’s separation of church and state, political scientists, sociologists, and social workers have set out to explore the capacity and efficacy of faith-based social service. Although focused on current policy, this scholarship raises important questions about the historical roots of faith-based organizations. I discuss those historical roots by focusing on the relationship between religiously affiliated social welfare organizations and public agencies. In the last seventy years, religious social welfare agencies in Indianapolis and other urban centers have provided a wide range of services. In the middle of the century, religious social services provided care for dependent children, unwed mothers, and homeless men. More recently they have tackled such problems as legal representation and housing. Public monies—local as well as federal—have proved critical to their ability to provide such care.

Although religious groups in almost all U.S. cities have contributed to the welfare of urban residents, the degree to which they have participated in social welfare endeavors varies from city to city and state to state. An analysis of one city, this book remains attentive to the way local politics and practices shaped social welfare even as it maintains a concern for the larger national scene. Indianapolis, a mid-sized city whose metropolitan population has risen from less than 500,000 in 1930 to more than 1 million in 2000, is an ideal place to explore the relationship between public and private social welfare. Since the 1930s, public authorities have worked diligently both to minimize expenditures and to keep its “bureaucratic” apparatus small. They achieved these objectives by keeping alive the notion that social welfare was a responsibility of private citizens rather than the body politic and by looking to the private sector to help deliver services.

Home to a conservative tradition, Indianapolis offers an espe-
cially valuable vantage point from which to consider the national context. At those times when public responsibility for social needs increased—most notably during the 1930s and 1960s—Indianapolis worked against national trends, or negotiated them uneasily. In rhetoric and practice, Indianapolis more closely resembled neighboring southern rather than northern cities, where most innovations in social welfare practices were created. Social welfare professionals traditionally viewed the state of Indiana as a whole as backward rather than forward-looking. However, in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, when policy makers are looking to the private sector to solve social ills, Indianapolis has been touted as a model. National figures, including President George W. Bush, have praised Indianapolis for its use of the private sector, and faith-based organizations in particular, in addressing the city’s social ills. Indianapolis’s relationship to the national story is complex, important because it has both resisted national trends and led them. In either case, Indianapolis provides a barometer for demonstrating how much national policy and ideas have changed.

Indianapolis’s religious, political, and cultural heritage has profoundly influenced the city’s social welfare system. Long known as the “northernmost southern” city, it has hosted populations with cultural roots in the American North and South. Indianapolis’s first settlers in the mid-nineteenth century comprised migrants from Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina, in addition to immigrants from Germany and Ireland.10 In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, migration from the upper South, both black and white, increased dramatically, infusing a southern flavor to the growing northern metropolis. Largely missing from Indianapolis were southern and eastern European immigrants, Catholics, and Jews, who settled in other industrial cities. At the turn of the century, when the foreign-born dominated most urban populations, they constituted less than 10 percent of the population of Indianapolis.11 Indianapolis took pride in its self-described status as a 100 percent–American town.

These settlement patterns created distinctive religious demographics. According to the 1990 Glenmary statistics, a breakdown of the city’s total “church-going” population reveals that Protes-
tants constitute just under 80 percent of the population. Catholics boast the largest denomination, approximately 20 percent of the city’s religious residents. (Catholics constitute a much smaller percentage of the total population.) Jews make up a meager 2 percent. Indianapolis has seen the number of evangelical Protestants rise since the 1960s as the mainline’s presence has diminished.

Politically, Indianapolis has lived up to its reputation as the northernmost southern city. Until the 1960s, racial and class hierarchies found full expression in civic and political arenas, with segregation in force and wealthier white citizens in control of most important political offices. Furthermore, the city took great pride in its tradition of “Hoosier independence.” Although Indianapolis’s governing structure has strong ties to the state legislature, city authorities have always prized their ability to make decisions without outside federal interference. Thus while the city participated as early as the 1930s in Social Security programs (including Aid to Families with Dependent Children), it refused until the mid-1960s to participate in other federal programs, most notably federal highway construction. Moreover, the city kept careful count of the amount of federal taxes Indiana residents sent to the federal government and the amount they received back in services. Paradoxically, then, the state on the one hand resisted accepting funds for fear of becoming “dependent” even as it lamented the dollars that “stayed in Washington.” Indiana was one of the few states where residents not only preached but also acted on their anti–federal government rhetoric.

The political climate changed dramatically in the mid-1960s, when, under the leadership of Mayor John Barton, a Democrat, Indianapolis fully participated in federal programs, including social welfare. However, this break with the past provoked vigorous debate, and older traditions persisted. Believing that social needs were a private rather than a public responsibility, the city actively encouraged voluntary social agencies to deal with urban social ills, and it referred clients seeking assistance from public authorities to private agencies.

While it was not uncommon for public authorities to help allay the cost that private agencies incurred, authorities remained com-
mitted to the idea that private solutions were the best. This political and cultural tradition helps explain why Indianapolis enthusiastically embraced the faith-based initiatives of both Mayor Stephen Goldsmith and President George W. Bush. After decades of resisting or begrudgingly accepting national trends in social welfare, Indianapolis in the 1990s stood at the forefront of current policy. This was not because Indianapolis changed its trajectory and mission, but because the nation adopted a philosophy and specific aims that reflected long-standing traditions and goals in Indianapolis. National politicians have looked to Indianapolis as a model for faith-based work, and Indianapolis natives such as Goldsmith have taken on national stature in public debates. Ironically, then, Indianapolis became a trendsetter not because it adopted a new set of values but because it remained committed to its traditions.

Without narrating a comprehensive history of the city’s social welfare system, I elucidate the general trajectory of the city’s social welfare policy within a national context by highlighting several exceptionally revealing cases. Beginning with the New Deal, chapter 1 describes how Catholic Charities responded to and affected the shape of the emerging welfare state in Indianapolis. National studies of Catholic Charities, most notably Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown’s *The Poor Belong to Us*, have demonstrated how Catholic social agencies significantly influenced the welfare state, shaped national policy, and guaranteed a future for Catholic social programs in both urban and rural locales. In Indianapolis, Catholic Charities recognized that governmental action was necessary, but it still safeguarded a role for Catholic social programs. Like Catholic social agencies elsewhere, Catholic Charities of Indianapolis found new life by harnessing itself to the growing welfare state. With donations falling and volunteer efforts declining, Catholic Charities eagerly accepted federally funded Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers. The county welfare department agreed both to send Catholic children in need of foster care to Catholic Charities and to fund their support. Catholics insisted they had a right to care for “their own” and to do so with tax dollars. They contended that their responsibility to protect the religious “rights” of Catholic children should guarantee them a place