

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY®: PRIVATE HOMES, BUILDING PUBLIC RELIGION. By Jerome P. Baggett. *Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 295 pp. \$74.50 (hard), \$24.95 (paper).*

This is a very balanced but definitely not a bland treatment of the dynamic tensions that arise when faith-based paradenominational voluntary organizations enter into partnerships with corporate sponsors, government bureaucracies, and God. Jerome Baggett analyzes both the strengths and limitations of the voluntary sector to address social problems. He uses Habitat for Humanity® as a case example of a paradenominational agency founded and preserved as a religiously inspired movement to put one's Christian faith into action.

Since its founding in 1976 by Millard Fuller, Habitat for Humanity® has sponsored the development of approximately 30,000 homes in the U.S. whose average cost in 1999 was \$45,000. These homes provide shelter for over 100,000 persons. Over 50 percent of the owners of these homes earned less than half of the national median income and one-third of the owners were single mothers.

Baggett points out that it is a difficult but not impossible task to establish rituals to preserve the original vision and mission that brought about this organization that is based on Gospel values at the root of the Christian community's understanding of the economics and compassion of Jesus and his call to his disciples in every age. What emerges from the author's honest discussion of the lived experience of Habitat for Humanity® is the conclusion that no mechanism for allocating the resources of a society is perfect. Pure market forces of allocation have made safe and standard housing unaffordable for at least 15 million American households. On the other hand, the methods used by Habitat for Humanity® also have their drawbacks. By using middle-class volunteers to review the applications of low-income families, it appears that even the low-income families who are selected resemble the middle-class volunteers in their educational, economic, family values, and respectability characteristics. Thus, there is no guarantee that the allocation of government subsidized Section 8 vouchers determined by the local housing authority are any less "empowering" for a family than the team building approach of a Habitat for Humanity® blitz that requires 500 hours of sweat equity by the family chosen to live in a home.

According to Baggett, the real genius of Habitat for Humanity® is that it successfully *institutionalizes* the expressive values of care and compassion that lie at the heart of true religious faith. As the volunteers

and staff who come from a wide income and class spectrum build houses together, they demonstrate that there still exists in our society a concern for helping poor and vulnerable families. However, this experience of action in the voluntary sector does not mean that we can ignore our most pressing social problems, nor does it mean they these problems are even remotely solvable through voluntary efforts alone. In fact, this voluntary effort should help awaken us to the need to support significant policy commitments from the federal government. Only through the *combined* efforts of government, a regulated economy, and a healthy voluntary sector can a modern nation truly provide for the common welfare of its citizens. In his own words: our voluntary experience should remind us that "we also live in an unequal society for which volunteerism and charitable giving, although commendable, are not realistic remedies."

In summary, Baggett offers us a sociological framework for understanding our society as divided into 3 major sectors: (1) government; (2) the market; and (3) the voluntary. A subset of the voluntary are the faith-based and paradenominational groups that provide an organized way for citizens to lead lives inspired by expressive values of care and compassion. His case study of Habitat for Humanity® employs a structured interview and participant observation methodology that probes the dynamics that occur when these three sectors interact with each other as persons who are both believers and citizens seek to build private homes for low-income families and transcend the individualism that can easily creep into one's spirituality. Baggett offers us a challenge that we are social and vulnerable persons who are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. There is a public place for religion in our society.

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