

Habitat for Humanity: Building Private Homes, Building Public Religion.

Jerome P. Baggett. **Temple University Press**, 2001. 295 pp. Cloth, \$74.50; paper, \$24.95.

Reviewer: ROBIN D. PERRIN, Pepperdine University

Jerome Baggett begins his book on the history, goals, and accomplishments of Habitat for Humanity with the following question: "What does religious faith have to do with stirring the broad civic participation and commitment to the common good that many see as necessary for sustaining a democratic society?" Following Tocqueville, Baggett maintains that in the U.S. there is a historical connection between religion, voluntarism, and democracy. Judeo-Christian values temper individualism, reminding Americans of their responsibility to others. This empowerment ultimately "produces virtuous citizens and thus a strong tradition of participatory democracy."

One of the ways this "social capital" expresses itself is in paradenominational organizations like Habitat for Humanity. Founded by millionaire-turned-philanthropist Millard Fuller in 1976, Habitat has today become one of the most visible charitable organizations in the U.S. The idea behind Habitat is simple enough. Donations are used to purchase land and materials. The homes, built primarily by volunteers, are then sold without interest or profit to needy families. Homeowners, who are considered partners rather than passive recipients of charity, are expected to contribute "sweat equity" hours to help build the home and are responsible for mortgage payments. This "hand up" philosophy, Habitat believes, gives homeowners an ownership stake, makes them more deserving in the eyes of potential converts, teaches important homeowner skills, and, ultimately, makes them more productive citizens.

Habitat hopes the experience will likewise be life-changing for volunteers. The world needs Christians to become agents of change, to give of their time and money, to fight for Jesus, and to fight for justice. Habitat believes that when people come together to work on a common goal, racial and class stereotypes are challenged, and social justice, simplicity of living, and Christian service are reinforced.

Baggett suggests, however, that many of these goals are not fully realized. Middle-class and mostly white volunteers descend on the building site and may

have little or no interaction with the mostly nonwhite homeowner family. When interaction across racial and class boundaries does occur, homeowners are often evaluated on the basis of how "middle-class" they show themselves to be. The class and power gaps are especially evident in the paternalistic relationship between the organization and the homeowner. Homeowners are expected to conform to Habitat ideals and often come to see themselves as clients judged by the watchful eye of the organization. This subordination, Baggett maintains, challenges the partnership ideal so central to Habitat's mission.

The success of Habitat has also contributed to a number of challenges, including the bureaucratization, professionalization, and commercialization of the organization. These tensions are especially evident in the increasingly tenuous relationship between the organization and its Christian mission. Habitat's vision has, from the beginning, been inclusive. Millard Fuller espouses a "theology of the hammer," suggesting that, while Christians may disagree on many issues, "we can all agree on the hammer as an instrument to manifest God's love." This doctrinal minimalism, which no doubt has contributed significantly to the growth of Habitat, has probably also led to an erosion of mission and ambiguity of purpose. Baggett, as well as many people within the movement, wonder if Habitat is in danger of losing its way.

There is not much to criticize in this book. I confess I would have liked to have seen more connections to the sociological literature on class, race, status inequality, prejudice, and institutional secularization. Overall, however, I very much enjoyed *Habitat for Humanity*. It is well written, engaging, and, at times, uplifting (where do I volunteer?). Who should read it? Certainly academics interested in religion, poverty, voluntarism, social movements, and social change should find the book informative. *Habit for Humanity* would also make an excellent supplemental text in a sociology of religion, social problems, or social movements course. I believe, however, that the value of the book extends far beyond the academic community. Indeed, the information is accessible to all, and anyone interested in Habitat will find this enjoyable and informative book worthy of their time.