



THE PEW
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LIFTING UP THE POOR

A DIALOGUE ON RELIGION, POVERTY AND WELFARE REFORM

*As part of the Pew Forum Dialogue Series on Religion and Public Life, Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence M. Mead, both respected social scientists as well as religiously committed individuals, have come together to discuss their agreements and disagreements about poverty, policy and theology. **Lifting Up the Poor** is introduced and edited by E.J. Dionne, Jr., Jean Bethke Elshtain and Kayla M. Drogoz. In this volume, Bane and Mead lay out the theological assumptions that inform their respective understandings of poverty—its nature and causes—and the different government policies they each advocate to alleviate the suffering of those who are impoverished. Drawn from their opening essays, from their response essays and from the volume’s introduction, this executive summary highlights some of their views on these important issues.*

Debates on public policy in the United States are shaped, in part, by the moral and religious commitments of individuals and communities. As the distinguished political scientist Hugh Heclo writes in *Religion Returns to the Public Square*, “Government policy and religious matters ... both claim to give authoritative answers to important questions about how people should live.” Heclo’s words apply especially to the issue of poverty, a matter on which the great religious traditions have much to say.

Religion is by no means the only factor in public policy debates. Many who come to the public square reach their conclusions on matters of import for practical and ethical reasons that have little or nothing to do with faith. Yet the religious and secular alike can agree that our public deliberations are more honest and more enlightening when the participants are open and reflective about the interactions between their religious convictions and their commitments in the secular realm. When policy

analysts and decisionmakers encounter statistics and trends that are indeterminate and inconclusive in and of themselves, competing values must be weighed and judgment calls made based on some moral criteria. Often, those criteria harken back to the policymaker’s religious value system, either implicitly or explicitly

Mary Jo Bane’s and Lawrence M. Mead’s ability to combine rigorous policy analysis with serious theological reflection might serve as a model for those who believe that religious voices have much to contribute to our nation’s public life. For if those who care about policy need to understand the faith dimension, those who bring their faith to public life need to accept the same standards of rigor that apply to others engaged in the debate. If faith matters, so do facts, history, experience and experimentation. Doing good is a worthy goal. More good can be done if those with good intentions pay close attention to what already works and to what might work in the future.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONSENSUS AND CONTENTION

Mead and Bane agree fundamentally on some things, particularly with regard to the general outline of existing programs that assist the poor. As Mead writes, “We disagree less than one might expect. We share the belief that an ambitious national antipoverty policy is necessary.” He also notes that they both “support the general direction of our national policy....” Their views on the earned income tax credit (EITC) and benefits to the elderly and disabled differ little from each other’s. Their views on Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), food stamps and other government programs are suggestive of the deeper differences in their approaches to poverty policy, but even on these points neither one is ready to argue for an overhaul of the programs.

Their general agreement on those issues is perhaps all the more striking given their stark differences on issues of theology, their articulation of the problem of poverty and the policies they advocate for groups not addressed by the above-mentioned government programs.

Bane finds their ability to agree on certain policies reassuring.

“It suggests that men and women can come together and solve narrowly defined but important problems, in this and in other policy arenas, on the basis of evidence or of reasonable compromises on how to proceed in the absence of definitive evidence—and do so within a broadly shared framework of principles and values, despite real or apparent disagreements on some of the important background issues.”

Why, then, do their differences matter? Bane argues that, “differences on definitions, explanations, principles and theological underpinnings are important in thinking beyond incrementalism, for shaping a moral stance, for establishing priorities and for dealing with uncertainty.”

Bane identifies her theology as largely in line with Catholic social teachings and a Catholic sensibility. She draws on a long tradition of church teachings on

issues of economics and poverty, as well as her own reading of the Bible and her moral judgment. The Catholic view encourages an approach that is, she believes, “hopeful rather than despairing, trusting rather than suspicious, more generous than prudent, more communitarian than individualistic.”

Furthermore, Bane continues, Catholics assert that there is a “preferential option for the poor”—an obligation to view their needs as especially important. “The Catholic tradition of respect for life,” Bane writes, “leads us to conclusions that are pro-life, pro-family and pro-poor. Anyone guided by these principles soon finds himself or herself treading uneasily upon the platforms of the two major American political parties.”

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Mary Jo Bane

Mead shares with his co-author the view that citizens—and especially believers—have a clear duty to the poor, a responsibility that is shared by individuals and government. However, Mead’s theological viewpoint is quite different from Bane’s. He writes as a Protestant, with strong echoes of Calvinist attitudes regarding the importance of a rigorous work ethic and individual responsibility. He criticizes Bane’s Catholic sensibility and Catholic social teachings. He sees no preferential treatment of the poor by Jesus. He reads the New Testament’s narrative of “salvation” as restoring marginal people to full membership in society as responsible individuals. Jesus, he says, responds to the poor but also expects good behavior from them, and government should do the same. The ideal is to create a community to which both rich and poor contribute.

RELIGION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Woven throughout their discussions of their theological differences as well as their differences on how they define the problem of poverty and its causes is the theme of personal responsibility versus community or government responsibility. Mead would encourage a reciprocal relationship between society and the poor by establishing a new social contract or covenant. This

would lead to a stronger sense of citizenship on the part of both those who are poor and those who are not. The argument for reciprocity is at the center of Mead's bold thesis on paternalism. He uses this term to characterize increased supervision and regulation of the lives of those who receive public assistance. Under Mead's vision of paternalism—much of which is embodied in the welfare reform legislation of 1996—welfare programs are no longer merely instruments for delivering benefits. They are based on requirements for the poor: to work, to accept job training, to keep their children in school, to make sure their children receive proper vaccinations. Paternalism emphasizes the obligations of the recipients, not just their needs and rights. In short, Mead's call is a call for tough love, a stern compassion and a belief that everyone must serve.

Bane agrees with Mead that work programs have largely proven successful and should continue. "Larry and I agree on the importance of employment in poverty policy. Our agreement on this is worth emphasizing. It comes from our shared sense that income is not the only dimension of poverty and that participation in the social, economic and political life of society is a crucial aspect of human flourishing and thus a crucial goal for public policy."

However, she tempers this empirical evaluation with a reminder that such programs do not attend to the needs of all the poor. She sees the community—in large part defined as the government—as responsible for meeting the needs of those who do not flourish under Mead's paternalistic self-help programs. She writes, "My moral argument asserts that the community is obligated to provide basic levels of sustenance, health care and education for all its members."

PEOPLE WHO ARE POOR

When defining poverty, Bane and Mead both use the federal poverty line as a means to determining the number of poor in this country and to discuss policies affecting them. Thus they both accept that a

family of three living on less than \$14,128 in 2001 qualified as poor. However, both discuss the fact that this definition of poverty does not take into account a number of other factors, particularly those articulated by economist Amartya Sen, who considers individual capability and ability to flourish as a better measure of who is and is not poor.

Despite these similarities, Mead and Bane focus on different subgroups among the poor. Mead gives his full attention to the nonworking, able-bodied, working-aged, long-term poor and their dependents. He does not

discount other segments of the poor, but he argues that "working-age individuals are a majority of the poor and whether they work is strategic for the whole poverty problem."

Bane, however, defines the poverty problem more broadly, demanding that attention also be given to the "57% of the poor who are elderly or working or who belong to families in which the head of the household works. For these poor, work requirements in welfare programs cannot be the only policy issue of interest."

While both recognize that nonwork is a major factor in creating and maintaining poverty, Mead thinks it is the greatest factor. He writes, "Long-term poor families tend to become poor because of the behaviors that make poverty controversial: Women have children out of wedlock, and then they or their spouses do not work regularly to support their children. ... Families become poor or go on welfare mainly because they lack earnings, not because they are headed by a woman...."

Further, Mead sees the levels of nonwork among working-age Americans as the product of a "culture of poverty." The poor, he says, "want to work, maintain their families and so on. But they feel unable to do so in practice. They perceive myriad obstacles outside themselves that make them unable to work." The culture of poverty, he argues, must be broken by overcoming a "defeatist culture." He worries that past failures lead poor people to internalize a paralyzing

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Lawrence M. Mead

sense of hopelessness, fatalism and despair. These, in turn, breed a lack of self-discipline and commitment to the future.

Bane argues that many people are poor because of factors beyond their control, including racial stigmas, other social injustices and accidents of life. She writes, “Poverty in the contemporary United States is a multifaceted phenomenon. Even when poverty is narrowly defined as material deprivation or low income, a look at the characteristics of those identified as poor suggests multiple underlying processes and, similarly, multiple possible policy approaches.”

Bane notes that many different groups, each with distinctive capabilities and needs, constitute the poor. “African Americans, Hispanics and immigrants are disproportionately poor. African Americans make up about one-quarter of the income poor and Hispanics another quarter. The poor are about evenly divided between the working poor and their families and those who do not work. Nonworkers include both those who are not expected to work (elderly and disabled people) and those who cannot find or hold jobs or who choose not to work. Poverty rates among nonelderly nonworkers are extremely high. About one-quarter of the poor received some form of means-tested cash assistance. Welfare recipients (families with children, headed for the most part by women, that received TANF benefits) make up less than one-fifth of the poor.”

RACE MATTERS?

Given this diversity of groups among the poor, Bane does not argue for one explanation of the causes of poverty. When considering the disparity between relative numbers of poor African Americans and Hispanics compared with whites, she draws on the work of economist Glenn Loury, author of *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*. Bane explains, “Loury argues ... that perceptions of inherent differences [between whites and blacks], which clearly shaped

racial attitudes before emancipation, are structured in many ways into relationships between blacks and whites and in turn perpetuate racial inequality. Self-destructive behaviors on the part of some blacks are part of this pattern, but not uniquely causal.”

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Lawrence M. Mead

Bane suspects that a similar dynamic of racial stigma exists for Hispanics, although produced by different historical circumstances. Bane is not attributing minority poverty simply to white racism, but rather to a sociological phenomenon that involves the actions and reactions of minorities and whites, based on distorted perceptions of the other on both sides.

Given that Mead and Bane believe that different sub-

groups among the poor need special attention and that they define the causes of poverty differently, it is no surprise that they articulate different approaches to solving the problem of poverty. They both address the policies that affect the nonworking, working-aged, able-bodied, long-term poor in their essays. However, Bane also discusses the need for policies that respond to the particular concerns of African Americans and immigrants.

In response to Bane’s attention to African Americans, Mead argues that, “in explaining *poverty*, race counts for less than in explaining overall racial inequality. The undiscipline seen among the black poor is also seen among the poor of other races.” Furthermore, Mead writes, “the evidence does not support the idea that the economy denies blacks all employment. To the contrary, huge numbers of blacks have been hired off welfare in recent years by employers hungry for labor. The case for barriers is stronger in regard to wages and inequality among the employed. Black workers typically make less than whites, but this is due largely to their having lower skills and poorer educations than average, not directly to racial bias.”

Bane’s subsequent response to Mead further delineates their different understandings of the causes and

nature of poverty. Bane writes that Mead “asserts that the barriers erected by racial discrimination or by institutional shortcomings in the labor market or in the education, health or social service systems matter little in explaining the plight of the contemporary long-term nonworking poor. I simply disagree. I do not claim that behaviors—choices about schooling, family formation, work, criminal activity and so on—are not implicated; such a claim would not only ignore empirical reality but also deny the ability of the poor to shape their own destinies. I do claim that behaviors and barriers interact and that we need attend to such issues as the continuing legacy of racial stigma, the continuing failure of many urban school systems and the lack of fit between the current labor market and the situation of many potential workers. ... I therefore argue that an antipoverty agenda must speak to these structural and institutional issues.”

Immigrants similarly command Bane’s attention as an underserved sub-group among the poor. Bane’s concern for immigrants comes in part from the fact that 20% of the poor in 1998 lived in immigrant households. Despite these high poverty rates, Bane observes, “Of course, the question that preoccupies the public and the Congress is not whether immigrants should receive preferential treatment but whether they should receive worse treatment. Undocumented immigrants are precluded from working legally and excluded from most government services and benefits. Legal immigrants who are not citizens had their access to welfare, food stamps and other benefits severely limited by the welfare reform legislation of 1996. These policies were adopted in 1996 primarily as cost-saving provisions, but they were justified by the desire to deter immigrants who come to this country primarily or partly to receive benefits.”

Bane makes clear that her theology informs her understanding of immigration policies. She writes, “It may well be that it is in the treatment of immigrants that Catholic social teachings and sensibilities have

their most radical bite. The scriptural mandate to love your neighbor is not limited to the neighbor who looks like you, who lives near you or who is a fellow citizen. ... In this context, it seems hard to justify raising barriers to entry or excluding some people from the resources of the society.”

Mead’s response to Bane’s discussion of the needs of immigrants is largely an argument for drastically altering immigration policy. He writes, “This is an area where policymakers must adopt a civic approach, placing good consequences above attractive intentions. I think the current level and manner of immigration is imprudent. More by drift than decision, the United States has opened itself to a flow of immi-

grants that could well damage the society, notwithstanding the great benefits the country has drawn from immigration in the past. One problem is that new immigrants to the country are predominantly low-skilled; a higher proportion of skilled immigrants would be worth more to the economy. Another problem is that the predominance of Hispanic immigrants in some localities is threatening the power of the English language, and schooling in

English, to integrate the newcomers. ... Immigration certainly should continue;... But the level should be reduced to what the nation can absorb without threatening its cohesion or its institutions.”

POVERTY POLICY

When their discussions turn to particular poverty programs, their differences are fewer, yet the dialogue continues to reflect their underlying differences in theology and analysis. Mead and Bane both support the EITC, a federal subsidy for low-paid workers. As Mead writes, “This program, which was sharply expanded in 1993, enjoys broad support precisely because it makes aid contingent on work.” Mead even looks favorably on expanding the program “as a way of raising the low incomes of many mothers who have left welfare for work.”

With regard to other programs, Mead writes, “I also support programs aimed at the unemployed, such as

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Mary Jo Bane

food stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid.” Bane’s support for those programs goes beyond Mead’s, even suggesting new social welfare programs. Bane believes, “The food stamp program ... is an uneasy but I believe basically sensible compromise.... Food stamps are not contingent on worthiness: they are available to old and young, the sick and the healthy, individuals and families, alcoholics and teetotalers, workers and nonworkers. Eligibility for food stamps is with some exceptions determined only by need defined as low income. That expresses our society’s belief—correct, I believe—that no one in this society ought to go hungry.” Food is not the only basic human need that Bane thinks ought to concern the American community. She writes, “There is less [societal] consensus on the issues of housing for the homeless or health care for the sick. Some states and municipalities provide minimal shelters and most guarantee emergency care for the sick, but there is no entitlement to housing or to health care. This is a failing of our very rich society, I believe.”

Mead agrees in principle with Bane that “we should also have national guarantees for shelter and health care such as those we have for food....” However, he argues that the problems are not as severe as generally thought and that such guarantees are not necessary beyond current programs. Further, Mead qualifies his support of food stamps. “I think the food stamp program is a vital dimension of the safety net. ... I am, however, torn between stiffening its work requirements and leaving it as a lifeline for all.”

This concern leads him to note some of his qualifications for his support of SSI: “Clearly, there should be public support for needy people who are disabled, but deciding who they are requires making difficult judgments. ... Until recently, SSI was overused by drug addicts, children and aliens; in 1996 Congress limited their eligibility. Admission to the program,

which is controlled by state agencies, may also have been lax. The disabled adults on SSI are supposed to be incapable of taking any gainful employment for at least a year. However, a majority of disabled recipients claim eligibility due to mental conditions, many of them judgmental.”

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Lawrence M. Mead

information while continuing to draw on their theological frames when making judgment calls.

Mead tackles the questions that policymakers face regarding welfare reauthorization (including TANF) head on. He writes, “I think work tests should be embraced rather than resisted. Instead of defending unconditional aid, the friends of the poor should willingly enforce work requirements for the employable up front and then rebuild a generous support system on the other side of entitlement. To that end, I favor the administration’s proposals for universal engagement and the 24-hour work standard. The 70 percent participation level and the 40-hour activity standard, however, are too demanding. It will be tough enough to achieve the 50 percent participation rate and the 30 to 35 hours a week that TANF originally mandated for 2002. To enforce requirements better, I would also toughen sanctions for noncompliance.

“On the other hand, I would still allow some training, provided it was aimed at specific jobs. I would improve support services and wage subsidies for recipients moving into jobs. One goal is to raise incomes, which is one of welfare reform’s unfinished tasks. I would also take further steps to both promote and enforce work by absent fathers, the other unfulfilled promise. Fathers must somehow be brought into the emerging new aid system, where people

Their respective views on TANF are similarly nuanced in their distinctions and ultimately closer than one might think given their ideological differences. They both look at the social science evidence of what has worked and base many of their positions on that

have to work but in return gain a more secure place in the society.”

Bane expresses her views on these points with a number of careful caveats. “My personal well-documented opposition to the 1996 welfare law rested partly on serious concerns about fair treatment by states and on the conviction that care for the poor is a national responsibility that ought to be shared by all.” These continue to be concerns of hers. She also notes that the evidence for the effectiveness of time limits is yet to be thoroughly evaluated, and she reserves judgment on that part of TANF.

Her opposition to work requirements, perhaps the most controversial piece of TANF, has ceased in principle. She writes, “Both historical and program evaluation evidence suggest that a combination of strategies that require participation in work or employment services and policies that reward work can result in both increased employment and increased family income.” After

citing some of that evidence, she notes, however, “What I have just articulated, of course, are arguments about work requirements in general, not about whether work requirements should be for 20, 30 or 40 hours a week or about whether education and training can count for all or part of the requirement. In making these decisions, I believe that it is important to understand the characteristics of those who would be affected: their family responsibilities; their own disabilities and other barriers to work; their ability to benefit from various types of experiences. Reasonableness and compassion preclude, I believe, a

40-hour work requirement for parents of young children, especially those who, like many now remaining on the caseload, often are burdened by multiple problems.”

CONVERSATIONS OF VALUE

That two brilliant social policy analysts both identifying as Christians could engage in the argument contained in these pages and in the book from which this is drawn tells us several important things. What they agree on—the urgency of assisting the poor, the importance of community, the value of work, the centrality of citizenship and responsibility—suggests ground for potential consensus. What they disagree on or, more precisely, where their emphases differ—notably the extent to which the causes of poverty are primarily individual or social—

points to why consensus is so difficult to achieve.

But the very fact that a dialogue rooted in faith has so much to say to a secular audience points to the importance of broadening our community of deliberation by making our most

deeply held commitments, beliefs and assumptions—and, yes, biases—explicit. For the believer and the nonbeliever alike, moral reasoning is informed by emotions (for example, gratitude, trust, hope), by affections (love, friendship) and by dispositions (responsibility, generosity, accountability). In wrestling with each other’s positions and commitments, Bane and Mead allow all who enter into their conversation the chance to sort out for themselves why they believe what they believe about poverty and its alleviation. Thus does the religious imagination offer a gift of secular discourse.

“Reasonableness and compassion preclude...a 40-hour work requirement for parents of young children, especially those who, like many now remaining on the caseload, often are burdened by multiple problems.”

Mary Jo Bane

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MARY JO BANE is the Thornton Bradshaw professor of public policy and management at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. From 1993 to 1996, she was assistant secretary for children and families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She resigned from that position after President Clinton signed the 1996 welfare reform law. From 1992 to 1993, she was commissioner of the New York State Department of Social Services, where she also had served as executive deputy commissioner from 1984 to 1986. From 1987 to 1992, at the Kennedy School, she was a professor of social policy and director of the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy. She is the author of a number of books on poverty, welfare and families.

LAWRENCE M. MEAD is a professor of politics at New York University and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford. He has been a visit-

ing professor at Harvard, Princeton and the University of Wisconsin. Mead was deputy director of research, Republican National Committee; policy scientist, the Urban Institute; and policy analyst, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. He has written numerous books, including *Beyond Entitlement*, *The New Politics of Poverty* and *The New Paternalism*. Before going to NYU in 1979, he held several policy and research positions in the federal government. He testifies regularly before Congress on poverty, welfare and social policy, and he often comments on those subjects in the media.

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THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE SEEKS TO PROMOTE A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW RELIGION SHAPES THE IDEAS AND INSTITUTIONS OF U.S. SOCIETY AND BEYOND. AT A TIME OF HEIGHTENED INTEREST IN RELIGION'S PUBLIC ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES, THE FORUM BRIDGES THE WORLDS OF SCHOLARSHIP, PUBLIC POLICY AND JOURNALISM BY CREATING A PLATFORM FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF ISSUES AT THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS. THE FORUM EXPLORES HOW RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND INDIVIDUALS CONTRIBUTE TO CIVIC LIFE WHILE HONORING AMERICA'S TRADITIONS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND PLURALISM.

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