Technology and the Common Good: In a Time of Division, We Should Unite to Serve Those in Need

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“Serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.”

Luke 1:74-75

Introduction

The American ideal of freedom encompasses the protection of individuals’ rights to live out a variety of faiths and worldviews, according to each person’s conscience. Even with diversity in our animating beliefs, we are united in commitment to building a society that respects the humanity and dignity of its members.

Acts of service—such as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and visiting the sick—honor our collective belief in the dignity of each person. These acts can be thought of as “the public good,” whether a person’s conception of the “good” is rooted in theology, in personal conscience, or in civic virtue.

When faith-based organizations work to bring about the public good, the greater community can and should support these activities. Even those who disagree with the theological motivation behind an act of service should appreciate the objective good being pursued.

Faith-based organizations do, in fact, pursue an astounding number of initiatives toward the public good. A study from Georgetown University found that religion contributes over $1 trillion per year to the socio-economic health of the United States through social services including, but not limited to, “education, healthcare, local congregational activities, charities, media, and food.”1 As Becket lawyer Luke Goodrich points out in his book, Free to Believe, that number “is more than the annual revenue of Google, Amazon, Apple, and the rest of the top ten tech companies combined.”2

Concerningly, however, as our culture becomes increasingly polarized, lack of unity in our faiths and worldviews seems to be generating a reluctance to unite to work for the public good as well. Increasingly, it seems that, as a society, we only support good

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works when they are pursued by people who think and believe like we do.\textsuperscript{3} In other words, public goods such as education, healthcare, and poverty relief efforts are being “thrown out with the bathwater” of unfamiliar or unpalatable beliefs and worldviews.

**Technology’s View of the Good**

A specific example of this occurs in the context of technology companies. The example is notable as these firms often lead and shape cultural trends.

As part of their corporate social responsibility policies and commitment to societal good, more than one hundred technology companies have adopted the praiseworthy practice of offering nonprofits discounts and donations on both hardware and software.

The donations and discounts are distributed based on certain eligibility criteria. In general, nonprofit organizations which are exempt from federal income tax under Internal Revenue Code § 501(c)(3) are eligible.

However, at least fourteen tech companies expressly disqualify otherwise eligible nonprofits from receiving donations and discounts if the nonprofits are religious and do not have a “secular community designation.”\textsuperscript{4}

To receive a “secular community designation,” the religious organization must redact any faith-based aspect of the organization’s history, identity, communications, and activities.\textsuperscript{5}

In addition to the express disqualification adopted by twelve of the companies, all but one of the participating companies require recipients to adopt policies which, in application, exclude any religious organization which uses religion as a hiring requirement for the organization’s ministers.\textsuperscript{6} In other words, a Muslim immigrant relief center, for example, would be ineligible for a discount if the center requires its employees to practice Islam.

The companies which implement these criteria excluding religious groups include

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\textsuperscript{4} [https://www.techsoup.org/restrictions](https://www.techsoup.org/restrictions).

\textsuperscript{5} The secular community designation is given to organizations which “provides non-religious services to people regardless of their religious beliefs, does not propagate a belief in a specific faith, and does not proselytize or attempt to convert.”

\textsuperscript{6} The other companies are Asana, Autodesk, Norton, People on the Go, Reading Eggs, Symantec, Tableau, Tech Bridge, Tech Impact, and Veritas. Organizations outside the TechSoup network also have similar policies against religious affiliated nonprofits, for example, Slack and Trello.
recognizable names such as Cisco, a top federal government contractor, as well as the cybersecurity giant Symantec and the project management company Asana, the parent entity for monday.com.7

A Reflection of Our Values

At first assessment, these companies’ policies may not seem concerning. After all, we live in a pluralistic society in which both people and businesses can freely choose what organizations and activities to support. Ultimately, everyone benefits from this freedom.

Yet, these policies reflect the values of our society – values to which we should rightly be attentive. The policies suggest that our society is so uncomfortable or unfamiliar with communities of faith that we choose not to unite around even activities which further societal good if those activities are faith-based. In other words, for some, efforts to promote the public good are tainted if carried out by people of faith.

Our Response: Recommitting to the Good

The apparent lack of support for faith-based organizations might initially trigger a response in kind—more ammunition for a divisive mentality of “they don’t support us, and now we won’t support them.”

However, this response is not consistent with the Gospel, and adopting this reaction will likely lead to more division. The result would likely be that, once again, ideological or theological battle lines are awarded more importance than the common good.

A better response might be to recommit ourselves to the common good, including our own efforts to bring this common good about, and to better explain to others how we can find unity in these efforts. Uniting to respond to issues such as gaps in the educational system, challenges for urban youth, homelessness, difficulties faced by individuals and families going through the immigration process, and poverty could not only further both the public good but also re-establish our ability to respect and understand those with different views and, through those relationships, to give witness to the Truth.

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7 BGOV200 2018.
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