

Faith-Based Decisions? The Consequences of Heightened Religious Salience in Social Service Referral Decisions

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Previous research suggests that clergy members are often an initial contact for people seeking advice or social services and clergy often refer such individuals in need to outside agencies. Recent “faith-based initiatives” seek to engage churches and religious groups more deeply in social service delivery, potentially changing the mix of organizations to which clergy might refer people in need. In addition, public debates about faith-based social services have drawn attention to religion, often in politically divisive ways. Using semi-structured interviews and vignettes in which key characteristics of outside agencies are experimentally varied, we explore the implications of this heightened attention to religion on clergy referrals. We find that increasing the salience of religion affects clergy referral choices, with some clergy even willing to sacrifice quality care and resources for an individual in need when religious options are available as referral choices. We argue that this occurs at least in part because making religion salient in policy and referrals makes religious differences salient as well.

When an individual is at a loss, facing a problem she simply cannot handle alone, it is likely that the first person she will turn to for help or advice is a clergy member (Chalfant et al. 1990; Milstein 2003). Because the majority of churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious organizations in the United States are too small to have resources to deal with congregants’ problems directly (Chaves 2004), religious leaders often refer individuals in need to external agencies. Recent “faith-based initiatives” at all levels of government seek to engage churches and religious groups more deeply in social service delivery, increasing the financial resources available to such groups, and potentially altering clergy referral options.¹ These initiatives, along with ongoing attention to religion’s role in politics, have heightened public awareness about religion and religious activity in the public sphere. In this research note we explore the possibility that the increased *salience* of religion in the public sphere may itself have consequences, whatever the ultimate influence religion or religious organizations may have in social services or politics. Specifically, we examine what religion’s increased salience might mean for clergy members who are faced with a church member in need. In a study of pastors, we find that religion figures importantly, and in somewhat surprising ways, into pastors’ thinking about where to send people for social services.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We use semi-structured interviews and vignettes in which key characteristics of outside agencies are experimentally varied to examine some possible consequences of increasing religion’s

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salience in the context of clergy referral decisions. We collected data in early 2001 when the faith-based initiative was relatively young and media coverage was steady.² We interviewed 19 Christian clergy in a mid-size southwestern city.³ After an initial open-ended question concerning their views on the faith-based initiative and religion’s role in social services, we asked the clergy to read and respond to a series of vignettes. After the vignettes but during the same interview session, we asked additional open-ended questions about the likelihood of facing the situations presented in the vignettes and about previous and anticipated courses of action in referrals.

The vignettes we created involved a hypothetical individual who comes to the clergy member for advice when facing one of four possible problems. The vignettes also describe two different social service agencies to which the pastor might refer this person, and we asked the clergy members to choose which of these two organizations he or she (two of our nineteen respondents were female) is likely to choose as a referral in their case. Vignettes are short descriptions of an event or social situation with “precise reference to what is thought to be the most important factors in decision making” (Alexander and Becker 1978:94). In this research we included four features of interest: (1) a person approaching a clergy member seeking a referral; (2) two service agencies from which to choose; (3) known or unknown quality of each agency; and (4) whether each agency was religious. An example is shown in Table 1.

The first two elements were always the same—each vignette included a person seeking help and two agencies from which the clergy must choose. However, we varied the quality and religious nature of the two agencies (Elements 3 and 4) in each vignette. We operationalize *known quality* of the service organization as a dichotomous variable indicating the level of expertise, professionalism, and local reputation of a service provider. The quality of each agency was clearly very high, or it was unknown. *Religiousness* is dichotomous as well, signaled by the presence or absence of a religious staff and the incorporation of religious elements in the services provided.

TABLE 1
VIGNETTE WITH CONTROL CHOICE CONDITION

Imagine that a 28-year-old wife and mother of two, who is active in the church community, comes to you seeking advice on where to turn for help. Her husband was recently laid off and took a significant cut in pay when taking a new job. In order to make ends meet, she needs to enter the work force and is looking for help *finding child care*.¹

Here are two organizations to which you might refer her for help.

Organization 1 is a center that has been in business for over ten years. You know people who have had good experiences there. The staff members get yearly state certification, they all have graduate degrees in *child development*,² and they are committed to helping individuals in need. Last year they moved to a brand new, centrally located facility.

Organization 2 is a relatively new center that has been in town for a few years. Because it is relatively new, you don’t know much about it. You do know that the staff is committed to helping individuals in need.

They are currently located in an older, renovated house.

To which of these organizations would you refer the person?

(Please circle one)

Organization 1

Organization 2

¹Because we worried that the type of problem might influence the referral suggestion, we varied this in the vignettes, using child care, job skills training, budgeting and money management, and help obtaining a general education degree (GED) as hypothetical issues for which the woman sought services. We deliberately created a “deserving” needy person with an uncontroversial request in order to minimize distractions to our experimental manipulation of religious salience. The type of help sought made no difference to our results, so we will not focus on that variation.

²In the vignettes with other problems, the graduate degrees were in counseling.

TABLE 2
SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS, BY QUALITY AND RELIGIOUSNESS

		Quality of Organization	
		High Quality	Unknown Quality
Religiousness of Organization	<i>Religious</i>	(1) High Quality, Religious	(3) Unknown Quality, Religious
	<i>Secular</i>	(2) High Quality, Secular	(4) Unknown Quality, Secular
Cell (1)	High quality, religious	Organization X is a center that has been in business for over ten years. You know people who have had good experiences there. The staff members get yearly state certification, they all have graduate degrees in child development, and they are committed to helping individuals in need. They use scripture, prayer, and daily Bible study in their daycare operations. Last year the center moved to a brand new, centrally located facility.	
Cell (2)	High quality, secular	Organization X is a center that has been in business for over ten years. You know people who have had good experiences there. The staff members get yearly state certification, they all have graduate degrees in child development, and they are committed to helping individuals in need. Last year they moved to a brand new, centrally located facility.	
Cell (3)	Unknown quality, religious	Organization X is a relatively new center that has been in town for a few years. Because it is relatively new, you don't know much about it. You do know that the devoutly religious staff is committed to helping individuals in need. They urge, but do not require, people to use scripture, prayer, and daily Bible study to address the problems they are experiencing in daily life. They are currently located in an older, renovated house.	
Cell (4)	Unknown quality, secular	Organization X is a relatively new center that has been in town for a few years. Because it is relatively new, you don't know much about it. You do know that the staff is committed to helping individuals in need. They are currently located in an older, renovated house.	

Crossing these two characteristics creates four possible agency types—high quality and religious; unknown quality and religious; high quality and secular; and unknown quality and secular. The table, with cells representing each of the agency types, is shown in Table 2. We paired the four agencies in four combinations, called choice conditions.⁴ Each vignette includes one choice condition—that is, two contrasting organizations from which the clergy members were asked to choose.

We used a within-subjects experimental design. As opposed to a between-subjects design where subjects are randomly assigned to only one of the experimental conditions, a within-subjects design exposes each subject to all conditions. Each clergy member we interviewed was asked four times to choose hypothetically between two agencies when referring a church member to an external service organization. After the vignette series, we continued the interviews, asking

**TABLE 3
EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS**

Choice Condition	Organization Descriptions		Responses	
			<i>N</i>	%
Control choice condition	Organization 1	High quality, secular	18	100
	Organization 2	Unknown quality, secular	0	0
	Total		18	100
Choice condition “A”	Organization 1	High quality, secular	13	72
	Organization 2	Unknown quality, religious	5	28
	Total		18	100
Choice condition “B”	Organization 1	High quality, religious	15	83
	Organization 2	Unknown quality, secular	3	17
	Total		18	100
Choice condition “C”	Organization 1	High quality, religious	15	83
	Organization 2	High quality, secular	3	17
	Total		18	100

*Note:*The three pastors who chose the high quality secular agency in choice condition “C” were the same three who were willing to sacrifice known quality to avoid religion in choice condition “B.”

about the sorts of problems clergy typically faced, how they tackled the problems on their own or determined referrals, and the types of services the church currently offered or would like to offer if given government funds. We also collected background and demographic information regarding both the congregation and the pastor (see the Appendix).⁵ We draw on the qualitative data collected in order to explore more fully our experimental results.

RESULTS

When presented with the control choice condition, a choice between two secular social service agencies—one of high quality and another of unknown quality—100 percent of the clergy unsurprisingly chose the high quality agency over the one of unknown quality.⁶ This result, as well as the results for the other choice conditions, is presented in Table 3. It is important to note that there is no mention of religion in this vignette or in the descriptions of the two organizations. This is the control condition, and the essence of the experiment is to compare this result—100 percent choosing high quality over unknown quality—with what occurs when religion is made salient in the choice.

Choosing Religion Over Known Quality

We made religion salient by independently varying the religious natures of the unknown quality and high quality organizations.⁷ In Choice Condition A, clergy are faced with a choice between a high quality secular agency and a religious agency of unknown quality. Organization 1 is still a high quality, secular service agency in this choice condition. However, religion is made salient in the referral process by adding religion to Organization 2, the facility of unknown quality.

The only difference between Choice Condition A and the control choice condition is that the organization of unknown quality is now known to be religious. Although 72 percent of the

clergy still chose Organization 1, the high quality choice, over a quarter of them now chose the religious organization of unknown quality over the high quality secular agency. Thus, adding information about religiousness to the unknown quality choice led 28 percent of respondents to choose the unknown quality organization. One-quarter of these clergy potentially sacrificed quality in order to *get* religion. This is a statistically significant difference from the control condition ($t = 2.56, p < .01$).

This choice is better explained by our interview data. Some clergy believe that religious organizations are better than secular organizations, *no matter what*, and will always choose the religious option. Thirteen of our 18 interviewees believe that religious organizations are better at dealing with particular types of problems. Specifically, six clergy members believed that counseling issues should be dealt with by a religious counselor or agency, and eight felt that child care should be provided by a religious institution. For instance, a pastor who described himself as theologically liberal in the post interview questionnaire⁸ said:

It would depend on the type organization I was referring them to. If it's daycare, I would prefer to send people to a religious daycare; there's a different kind of atmosphere there. But for budgeting and money, religion's not very important (L2).

Some believe that problems such as the ones in our vignettes, as well as other issues such as marital problems or drug addiction that church members might bring to a church leader, are symptoms of an underlying spiritual condition. Spiritual difficulties, then, require a spiritual solution. As one pastor put it: "For the abuse problems I normally deal with, it takes an act of God" (VC1).

Clergy have other reasons for believing that religious organizations might make good service providers. Some pastors felt that religious organizations are more honest and capable than their secular counterparts. One pastor noted: "Faith groups provide a better service. They're spiritual as well as practical, making for more success" (C8). Another asserted that "houses of faith" manage funds more efficiently (C2). One clergy member noted: "Given equality, I will always recommend the faith-based facility" (C11). These comments show that while the end purpose of aiding those in need is paramount, the presence of religion in such services adds another layer of consideration to the decision-making process.

Choosing Secularism Over Known Quality

Some might argue that the previous result—clergy members' willingness to sacrifice known quality in order to refer an individual to a religious organization—is not surprising. More surprising, perhaps, is our finding that 17 percent of our respondents would sacrifice quality in order to *avoid* religion.

While Choice Condition A added religious characteristics to the unknown quality organization, Choice Condition B added religious characteristics to the *high* quality organization. In this choice condition, the only change from the control condition is adding religion to the high quality option—again making religion salient in the referral choice. Clergy are now asked to choose between a high quality religious organization and an unknown quality secular agency.

Once again, most clergy, 83 percent, chose the high quality agency. However, 17 percent now chose the secular agency of unknown quality. This is again a statistically significant increase from the control condition ($t = 1.84, p < .05$). As in the first variation, making religion salient led clergy to sacrifice quality, but in this case, some clergy are sacrificing quality in order to *avoid* referring someone to a religious social service agency.

Again, this result is elucidated through our qualitative interviews. For example, one very liberal clergy member said, "as committed as I am to being in public life, the way that the majority of churches witness to society is inappropriate" (VL1). The same pastor, when asked

about the religious organizations in the vignettes, emphatically stated that he would never send someone to “a place like that.” This suggests that the heightened salience of religion in the social services arena could have unexpected consequences for the referral process. Specifically, under certain circumstances, the religiosity of an agency may become more important to referring parties than the quality of the service it provides.

Another potential consequence we observed is that although all share a common identity as Christians, they are quick to note the differences between their religious views and those of others. Hence, by making religion salient, we simultaneously made salient *religious differences*, differences that might otherwise be latent in our religiously pluralistic society.

For example, one conservative pastor attributed the limited social services provided by conservative Evangelical churches as a reaction against “the social gospel of liberal mainline churches who only do the social and not the spiritual” (VC1). In contrast, another conservative pastor spoke against churches that use social services as proselytizing tools when he said, “Jesus gave a good example to aspire to. He did things to meet need, not to increase followers” (C2).

When we asked pastors about government funding for religious social services, their responses included two main themes—concern over *who* would be receiving the funds and what the *purposes* motivating such religious groups might be. Thirteen clergy expressly indicated discomfort with certain groups receiving government funding. The pastors were particularly concerned about two possibilities: money going to religious groups with views different from their own and money going to religious extremists of any sort.

For example, a conservative pastor stated his opposition to the solutions that some religious groups might give an individual in need:

I send people to agencies of a like-minded faith. Faith is an important part of healing, preferably Evangelical . . . They have to hold the word of God in high regard. He's the final authority, not Dr. Spock. I'm not a Dr. Spock fan, no Freudian guys. I want guys who use the Bible (C9).

This pastor thought that some religious groups might put too much weight on more secular philosophies such as psychology.

Other pastors, less concerned with the advice religious agencies might provide, questioned the potential motives newly funded religious groups might have for providing social services in the first place. While some clergy were worried about a lack of attention to spiritual needs, others worried about groups whose only motive was to proselytize. One of our pastors was quite explicit about this orientation: “what my church does for the needy is not out of charity, but to propagate the faith” (C2). Drawing parallels between the idea of faith-based social services and the foster care system, one pastor said: “If you say, ‘Here's some money to go help people,’ it has a way of bringing out people you don't want doing it” (C6). Interestingly, this unease over how the money might be used, and by whom, was evident in comments from both liberal and conservative clergy.

The Separation of Church and State

Discovering a willingness among a minority of clergy to sacrifice quality in order to either avoid or ensure religion is our central finding, but we also find that enhanced attention to religion and social services raises yet another important issue. Although we did not ask clergy any questions directly about church and state, the majority offered a comment or opinion on this issue. While some only alluded to the issue, making statements like, “I don't want any government sponsored religion” (C5), others were much more explicit in connecting the faith-based initiative to the institutional arrangement of church and state separation. A liberal pastor stated: “This is the founding experience of our country—church and state, one nation under God—but it's not kosher to use this to further one belief system in opposition to another . . . This [religion] shouldn't

be a hook for helping people” (L1). Similarly, a middle-of-the-road clergy member asserted: “Forefathers were scriptural in the Constitution, but you have to get some separation of Church and State. Churches can get their own agenda” (M1).

The pastors’ discussions of the relationship between church and state take two distinctly different outlooks. The first group views faith-based initiatives in an almost utopian light, hoping for a new closeness between church and state. For instance, one conservative clergy member saw government funds coming to churches as the means to bring churches back to a more central place in American communities (C2). Another, a moderate pastor, saw the faith-based initiative as an opportunity to renew church-state relations:

The government can’t do it alone. The government needs the church and vice versa. Historically, the Declaration of Independence and Constitutions were formed by politically and religiously active people. I see a unity in bringing this back (M1).

These clergy were clearly in favor of the faith-based initiative, voicing a sense of hope about the renewed closeness and cooperation between church and state. However, it is important to note, this hope also often exists in tandem with suspicion of other religious organizations.

Despite the existence of clergy who were optimistic about the faith-based initiative and a decreasing separation of church and state, other clergy clearly felt that the distance between church and state is beneficial. Many pastors believe that such distance is valuable not only to the government, but to religious groups as well. One pastor warned: “We have to be careful—as religious individuals—because government begins to dictate what you can do” (L2), while another conservative pastor stressed that it is important to realize that the separation between church and state was intended “to protect the church, not the state” (C1). A liberal pastor argued that the two entities should be separate so that religion may exercise its proper role in politics—that of a prophetic voice: “The church should be involved in politics by challenging the government, not by running social services” (VL1). We do not mean to imply that clergy were not already cognizant of complex church-state issues. The point is that making religion salient in the social service arena also called to mind, without prompting, the larger issue of church-state relations.

CONCLUSION

This research was motivated by the desire to understand better the possible outcomes of increasing religion’s salience in public discourse and programs and, specifically, how this salience may affect clergy referrals to social service groups. We discovered that, when faced with explicitly religious options, some clergy members are willing to sacrifice quality care and resources for an individual in need. Pastors making referrals may choose an agency of unknown quality over an agency with a stronger reputation simply because religion either is, or is not, a part of the service. Therefore, increased attention to religion and social services has the potential to create an environment that allows religion, and not quality, to be the predominant means by which decisions are made by some referral sources. More broadly, our research suggests that such enhanced attention to religion may unintentionally heighten awareness of religious differences, raising the specter of denominationalism in a social service arena in which such religious divisiveness has been largely absent.

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NOTES

1. At the federal, state, and local levels, government officials have tried to encourage religious organizations to apply for public funding, and to fund them if possible (Formicola, Segers, and Weber 2003; Kennedy and Bielefeld 2003; Wuthnow, Hackett, and Hsu 2004). These efforts have the potential to increase the number of newly funded religious organizations in the pool of social service providers.
2. Media coverage is relevant as background for our interviews rather than for the experiment. The salience of religion is operationalized in our vignettes through the presence or absence of religiosity of the organizations in our choice conditions.
3. We randomly selected 26 Christian churches from the city's phonebook and contacted the church leaders requesting their participation in a project about "Charitable Choice and President Bush's Faith-Based Initiative." Nineteen participated.
4. There are actually six possible combinations of agencies. However, in addition to one "control" condition, we chose the three that were most theoretically interesting.
5. Seventy-two percent of our clergy respondents described themselves as theologically conservative, and the remaining 28 percent classified themselves as either middle-of-the-road or liberal theologically. Fourteen (78 percent) of our respondents were European American, and 89 percent were males. We compared this breakdown with data from the National Congregations Study (Chaves 1998) and found that nationally, 81 percent of clergy are European American, 95 percent of clergy are male. In the NCS, 53 percent of clergy describe themselves as theologically conservative, with 47 percent theologically middle-of-the-road or liberal. Our clergy sample is quite similar to the nationally representative sample in terms of gender and ethnicity, and is more conservative theologically.
6. When given a choice between high quality and unknown quality secular agencies, 18 respondents chose the high quality organization. The pastor who chose the unknown quality agency was dropped from the analysis out of concern that he may have misunderstood the vignettes as written.
7. We varied the order in which choice conditions were presented to the clergy; we found no significant ordering effects.
8. Clergy quotes from different organizations are designated by a code corresponding to the clergy member's theological self-classification on a five-point conservative/liberal scale (VC = Very Conservative, C = Conservative, M = Middle-of-the-Road, L = Liberal, VL = Very Liberal) and their numbered order in the Appendix (1, 2, 3 . . .).

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**APPENDIX:
CLERGY SELF-CLASSIFICATIONS AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

Identifier	Clergy Theological Classification	Clergy Political Classification	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Congregation Size	Denomination or Tradition
VC1	Very conservative	Conservative	European American	Male	40	60	Nazarene
VC2	Very conservative	Very conservative	European American	Male	55	380	Evangelical Free Church
C1	Conservative	Conservative	European American	Male	50	180	Methodist
C2	Conservative	Conservative	European American	Male	53	700	Assemblies of God
C3	Conservative	Conservative	Jewish	Male	35	60	Messianic Jewish
C4	Conservative	Middle-of-the-road	Korean	Male	59	60	Presbyterian USA
C5	Conservative	Conservative	European American	Male	54	150	Latter Day Saints
C6	Conservative	Conservative	European American	Male	32	400	Baptist General Assembly
C7	Conservative	Conservative	Hispanic	Female	35	60	Assemblies of God
C8	Conservative	Conservative	European American	Male	59	80	Evangelical
C9	Conservative	Very conservative	European American	Male	42	60	—
C10	Conservative	Conservative	European American	Female	45	135	Nondenominational
C11	Conservative	Conservative	European American	Male	41	1,800	—
M1	Middle-of-the-road	Middle-of-the-road	European American	Male	38	150	Evangelical
L1	Liberal	Conservative	European American	Male	63	350	Unity
L2	Liberal	Middle-of-the-road	African American	Male	41	90	—
VL1	Very liberal	Very liberal	European American	Male	46	250	Presbyterian USA
VL2	Very liberal	Very liberal	European American	Male	45	70	—

Note: Clergy were asked to separately classify themselves theologically and politically on a scale of very conservative, conservative, middle-of-the-road, liberal, very liberal. Their theological self-classifications are used as identification markers in this article. The questions used for these orientations were identical to those used in the National Congregations Study (Chaves 1998).