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Mavericks or Allies?

The Role of Faith-Based NGOs in the Anti-Trafficking Movement



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Introduction

As awareness of trafficking in persons (TIP) and contemporary slavery has grown over the past twenty years, so has the number of organizations forming the modern abolition movement. From vast international organizations like the United Nations (UN) to local rehabilitation centers working with four to five trafficking victims in Nepal, organizations vary drastically in their mission, size, range of influence, and perspective. Among non-governmental organizations (NGO), common activities include raising awareness and financial support, researching TIP, providing victims services, and advocating for specific policy outcomes at local, national, and international levels. Further complicating the relationship between all of these organizations is the fact that many of the NGOs working to end modern slavery are faith-based (FBNGO). The role of FBNGOs in general is unclear and often contested within the UN¹ and conservative Christian groups in the United States have been accused of using the modern abolition movement to pass restrictive legislation unrelated to TIP². Intertwining a religious mandate with their purpose, FBNGOs are sometimes seen as mavericks unconcerned with anything other than their narrowly defined mission and unwilling to compromise in order to work with others. However, many FBNGOs provide a sense of legitimacy within their community at large, motivation, wisdom, and a great wealth of human and financial resources. Exploring the role of FBNGOs in the anti-slavery initiative is a significant goal in terms of difficulty but also of importance. FBNGOs have already had a massive impact on the way in which TIP and slavery have been conceptualized³ and their voice is likely to grow stronger in the coming years. They have the potential to become frustrating obstacles, quarrelsome adversaries, or powerful allies. This paper provides insight into the motivations, systems, and goals of anti-

trafficking FBNGOs, identifying both weaknesses to be addressed and best practices to be encouraged and replicated.

What is a FBNGO?

Defining a FBNGO is difficult, but within the scope of this paper it refers to those organizations that specifically define their purpose within the framework of a faith tradition and whose organizational mission itself is an expression of that faith. Therefore, if every member of an organization individually identifies with a faith tradition that motivates them in their work but the organization itself defines itself outside of religious boundaries and makes no commitment to represent or share the tenets of any faith tradition they shall not be considered a FBNGO.

FBNGOs shall be defined those organizations that openly provide some sort of outreach or assistance as an expression of their faith. World Vision is an example within the United States because they provide a variety of programs worldwide, motivated by their desire to express Christian ideals. Their vision statement states:

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organization dedicated to working children, families and communities to over come poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.⁴

Their physical mission is intertwined with a spiritual mandate. The degree to which this spiritual mandate affects the work of a FBNGO varies greatly. It may be helpful to think of FBNGOs as existing along a continuum. At one extreme would be groups whose primary purpose is church planting or building and will provide goods or services as a means of access to those they are trying to reach with their religious message. An example of this would be the International Mission Board, an entity of the Southern Baptist Convention, whose mission “is to

make disciples of all peoples” in fulfillment of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20⁵. At the other end are those who feel compelled by their faith to act on the behalf of marginalized groups, but offer services with no expectation of conversion and programs are delivered without any specific religious message. Catholic Relief Services provides an example on this end. MORE

Why Does it Matter?

Religiosity, both in terms of numbers and intensity, is declining in parts of the world while rising in others, creating a gap between institutions, organizations and people that is difficult to bridge. In 2002, Religion Counts published a study demonstrating the rise of the religious voice at the UN, explaining how religious groups relate to the UN and showing how their voice has become stronger in recent years. A great deal of this activity has centered on women’s rights and human trafficking. In 2007, the UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT) sponsored an international forum of 125 religious leaders from a variety of faith traditions to come together to discuss human trafficking. They reaffirmed their anti-trafficking stance based on a shared belief that every person is sacred and acknowledging that there are no simple solutions to such a complex problem, committed themselves to a set of strategic imperatives within the modern abolition movement.

Within the United States, a variety of Christian anti-slavery organizations have been founded and publications, including denomination’s magazines, novels, newsletters and books dealing with a theological response to social justice issues, have honed in on human trafficking and modern slavery. The influence of the evangelical right was very active in determining the wording and emphases of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) that was the

first comprehensive Federal law to protect victims of human trafficking or prosecute their traffickers in the United States. This influence has been critiqued for creating a policy response that is fixated on sexuality and the castigation of prostitution.

Diverging perspectives on religion have had and can continue to have a powerful impact on the nascent modern abolition movement creating space for heightened tension and disagreement. However, the nascent nature of the movement also creates space for dialogue and malleability. There is time left to refine foundational approaches and create a platform that allows many and diverse actors to contribute their efforts without focusing exclusively on the pet issue of one group.

Classifying FBNGOs

McCarthy and Castelli⁶ provide a helpful framework for categorizing faith-based groups in general, identifying three general categories: congregations, national networks, and religious freestanding religious organizations. Congregations are local, community-based groups organized around religious worship. They don't usually have a direct affect on agenda setting or policy creation, but they provide inspiration, motivation, and support for actors that do. Networks include denominations and their social service arms that may be national or international and networks of related organizations. Freestanding religious organizations are incorporated separately from congregations and networks, maintaining varying degrees of connection with them. While FBNGOs belong to the third category, it is helpful to be aware of the other categories because religious networks cross their boundaries. Many are also international in nature.

The core values, infrastructure and mission of FBNGOs vary greatly. For example Christian Solidarity International (CSI) a FBNGO that is “committed to stand in solidarity with those who are being persecuted for their faith in the Sudan, Iraq, and Pakistan” as they “free, feed, and heal captives.”⁷ They have been highly criticized for the engaging in “slave redemption,” the practice of buying back slaves in the Sudan. Among critics were UN bureaucrats who “argued the redemptions actually encouraged slave trafficking by making the slaves salable.”⁸ Skinner goes on to describe a rescue mission that he observed, run by battle hardened ex-soldiers eager to make a difference for Jesus. John Eibner addressed the redeemed slaves saying:

When you remember this day, remember that we have come and we have met you because there are many people around the world who have cared about you, who have prayed for you, and God has heard your cries, and he has seen your tears.⁹

After being freed in the name of Jesus, redeemed slaves were released with little resources, no access to rehabilitation programs or other services, and little to no follow-up. Viewed by most as incomprehensibly irresponsible and others as a hoax, CSI provides an example of FBNGOs at their worst. It operates with total disregard for governments, humanitarian aid providers, and other anti-slavery actors, using religion as a justification, and labeling critique as religious persecution. No international institution, other than those who participate in it, supports the practice of slave redemption.¹⁰ As a result of its many controversial actions, CSI had its Economic and Social Council consultative status to the UN revoked in 1999.¹¹

On the other hand, the Diocesan and Welfare Society (DDWS) a Catholic organization working in northern India has more than 20 years of experience working on projects that cross

religious and ethnic divides to empower the poorest of the poor in this area of rural India. They run programs that combat human trafficking through prevention, protection, reintegration and public awareness.

They run Bal Vikas Ashram¹², a rehabilitation center for children between the ages of eight and fourteen who have been rescued from slavery in northern India. Bal Vikas Ashram works closely not only with the children themselves but also their families and communities, providing education, legal services, and education. Contradictory to the experience of many rehabilitation centers, few of the graduates from this program are re-trafficked and many of the communities in which they work initiate their own independent campaigns to end slavery after working with Bal Vikas Ashram.

Obviously these organizations, and the reception of their work by the international community, differ greatly, highlighting the importance of acknowledging the diversity among FBNGOs. Making a statement that paints each one as either a maverick or an ally ignores reality.

Critique of FBNGOs

NGOs are sometimes criticized for a lack of accountability, working with too narrow a focus, and basing decisions on donor desire rather than legitimate need. The critique against FBNGOs isn't unique but it can be more intense because of inflexibility on the part of FBNGOs. When certain methods, priorities, or strategies are ascribed to God, there isn't much room for debate with other temporal actors. Viewing their mission as a spiritual mandate, their area of focus can be extremely narrow as they are highly committed to a specific outcome. Operating under what is perceived as a higher moral authority than other NGOs or IOs, some FBNGOs are unwilling to make even the slightest concession in outreach strategy and risk compromising the

greater good of a program for the sake of advancing organization-specific religious goals.¹³ For example, anti-trafficking FBNGOs have focused on sex trafficking almost to exclusion of all other forms of trafficking and slavery. Some donors expect their dollars to end up in conversions and are more concerned with proselytization than service delivery. Faith based groups have been eager to use a trafficking platform to ban prostitution or prevent government funds from supporting groups that don't have an explicit anti-abortion stance (even if they don't work with pregnant women in their organization)¹⁴.

Further complicating the issue is an apparent reluctance on the part of some FBNGOs to identify as such. Despite the fact that they appear faith-based in every detail of operation and a shared faith provides the purpose for both the organization and its members, they bury this fact, skirt the issue or even flatly deny religious affiliation. This critique is not concerned with their degree of religiosity but in the difficulty of its discovery. Work of the highest quality is thrown into question when an organization isn't honest or transparent about its mission and purpose.

Perhaps hesitation to self-identify as a FBNGO is due to a desire to avoid association with widely discredited religious groups perceived as giving all FBNGOs a bad name. A better method would be to follow the example of other NGOs and FBNGOs doing similar work that are widely respected in their fields.

Benefits Offered by FBNGOs

FBNGOs can also offer unique and important contributions to anti-slavery efforts. They have access to an extensive human and financial resource, drawing not only on the staff and volunteers of their specific organizations, but also the congregations and religious networks with which they are affiliated. The Cape Town Declaration noted that religious leaders find

themselves in front of “a captured, multi-skilled and professional resourceful audience” sometimes as often as twice a week¹⁵ and Non-Profit Research Fund estimates that religious congregations, national networks, and free standing organizations in the United States spend between \$15 and \$20 billion of privately donated funds a year on social services and outreach programs.¹⁶

Faith-based groups bring other benefits that are not as easily quantifiable. In a field that is often discouraging with little immediate change seen, spiritual motivation results in committed advocates who will continue to press forward even when faced with disappointing results. They are willing to make great sacrifice for a cause, not only because of its importance to them, but because they believe their participation fits into a bigger picture that is of eternal value. Religious groups enjoy a deep sense of legitimacy all throughout the world both and are often led by trusted moral leaders motivated by long-standing traditions of benevolence and a desire to help the helpless. These men and women have the ability to sway the perceptions and actions of those that follow them, which has profound implications for the anti-slavery movement on two fronts. These leaders have the ability to motivate action and advocacy in societies relatively free from trafficking, while chipping away at negative patterns that reproduce conditions leading to vulnerability in those communities that experience high TIP rates. Finally, efforts of FBNGOs are in some cases thought to be more sustainable because of the enduring presence of faith traditions enjoy within some communities, and the existence of already established social networks and systems.

Best Practices

Service without regard to religious membership or beliefs:

FBNGOs should never discriminate against the victims they serve because of differing religious beliefs. CRS and LFS are respected both nationally and internationally and for their work and ability to prevent religious ideology from coming between them and the people for whom they advocate and provide services.¹⁷

Service provided without any element of coercion:

FBNGOs rescuing or providing services to victims of human trafficking should not require that they conversion, participation in religious services, or communicate that slaves were rescued for the express purpose of being “saved” through a specific religion. Spiritual coercion should be regarded as a form of re-victimization and avoided at all costs. Bal Vikas Ashram, an organization in India who frees child slaves working in carpet mills throughout Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, India. They provide and an extensive rehabilitation program that encourages spiritual growth, but the children are exposed to a variety of religious traditions and allowed to choose for themselves.¹⁸

Rehabilitation and/or Reintegration:

Those organizations that are involved in the freeing of slaves should view emancipation, not as an event, but as a process and ensure that victims are provided with an occupational skill to provide for their futures. Sankalp, an Indian non-profit organization, does this in a unique way working with stonebreakers living as slaves in India. Instead of trying to teach them a new trade, Sankalp helps slaves gain ownership of the quarries in which they work. The work is still difficult and their options limited, but options do exist. Former slaves are given control of their lives and are able to retain any profits from the quarries.¹⁹

Conclusion

A better understanding of the role anti-slavery FBNGOs, leading to an improved relationship with other anti-slavery actors is imperative for two reasons. First of all, bringing a rich variety of traditions, perspectives, and resources, they are worth the effort. Secondly, their influence is growing and its power can either be harnessed through cooperation or fought against as a dangerous adversary. FBNGOs operate in a network that includes local congregations, denominations, and freestanding networks that are often international in nature. Their purpose, mission, and strategy vary widely. Critiques levied against FBNGOs aren't that different from those levied against NGOs in general, but the spiritual nature of their mandate further complicates discussion. There is a great deal that FBNGOs bring to the table in terms of resources, both human and financial. Debating the role of FBNGOs in the modern abolitionist movement is controversial and often contentious but there is too much at stake to ignore it. Maintaining an open dialogue is the most important step in this journey. Motivated by understanding, determined by conviction, and empowered with knowledge effective alliances between FBNGOs and other anti-slavery actors can be forged, moving the today's abolition movement one step closer toward eradicating slavery.

¹ Know, Geoffrey, ed. *Religion and Public Policy at the UN*. Report. Park Ridge, IL,: Religion Counts, 2002.

² DeStefano, Anthony, M. *The War on Human Trafficking: U.S. Policy Assessed*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2008.

³ Bernstein, Elizabeth. "The Sexual Politics of the 'New Abolitionism'" *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2007).

⁴ "World Vision: Our Mission." Home page 2010 (World Vision) <http://www.worldvision.org/content.nsf/about/our-mission> (accessed October 31, 2010).

⁵ "About IMB" Home Page 2010 (International Mission Board). <http://www.imb.org/main/page.asp?StoryID=4528&LanguageID=1709> (Accessed October 31, 2010).

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- ⁶ McCarthy, John and Jim Castelli. *Religion Sponsored Social Service Providers: The Not-So-Independent Sector*. Working Paper. Aspen. The Aspen Institute, 1998.
- ⁷ Eibner, John. "Donate Here to Support Our Work!" Christian Solidarity International. <http://www.csi-int.org/index.php> (accessed October 7, 2009).
- ⁸ E. Benjamin Skinner. *A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern Day Slavery*. New York: Free Press, 2008, 69.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 87
- ¹⁰ Claude d'Estree, "Contemporary Slavery & Human Trafficking, University of Denver, Denver CO, October 7, 2009
- ¹¹ Geoffrey Knox, *Religion and Public Policy at the UN: A Religion Counts Report* (Park Ridge: Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics & Catholics for a Free Choice, 2002), 28.
- ¹² *Bal Vikas Ashram*. Directed by Peggy Callahan. United States: Free the Slaves, 2006.
- ¹³ A. Rani Parker. "Prospects for NGO Collaboration with Multinational Enterprises." In *Globalization and NGOs: Transforming Business, Government, and Society*, 81-105. Westport: Praeger, 2003.
- ¹⁴ Zimmerman, Yvonne C. "From Bush to Obama: Re-thinking Sex and Religion in the U.S.'s Initiative to Combat Human Trafficking." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (Spring 2010).
- ¹⁵ The Cape Town Declaration: The International Forum's Global Inter-faith Dialogue "What the Religious Community Can Do to Combat Human Trafficking," 3-5 October 2007.
- ¹⁶ John McCarthy and Jim Castelli. *Religion Sponsored Social Service Providers: The Not-So-Independent Sector*. Working paper. (Aspen: The Aspen Institute, 1998), 19.
- ¹⁷ Claude d'Estree, "Contemporary Slavery & Human Trafficking, University of Denver, Denver CO, September 9, 2009
- ¹⁸ *Bal Vikas Ashram*. Directed by Peggy Callahan. United States: Free the Slaves, 2006.
- ¹⁹ *The Silent Revolution*. Directed by Peggy Callahan. United States: Free the Slaves, 2005.