
Reviewed by Xochiquetzal Luna Morales, Doctoral Candidate, Wilfrid Laurier University, luna9500@mylaurier.ca

Land of Stark Contrasts. Faith-Based Responses to Homelessness in the United States intertwines two critical areas of contemporary humanitarian and development assistance: religion and those who are unhoused. Specifically, it focuses on the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in alleviating homelessness in the planet’s wealthiest country where, paradoxically, many live in poverty. The text draws attention to the fundamental, creative, and expanding role of FBOs in this context. Through a set of thirteen chapters, editor Manuel Mejido Costoya and the book’s contributors challenge prevalent notions of religion’s place in post-secular discourses, as well as neoliberal conceptions that strip people in need of human dignity. The book also explores how FBOs’ religious practices and beliefs impact society’s attitudes towards homelessness.

Traditionally, homelessness has been understood under the lenses of individual practices and choices. This neoliberal vision conceives the value of human beings according to their capacity as consumers and their ability to adapt to market conditions. It also assumes that every person is responsible for their own situation and well-being inasmuch as their decisions, aspirations, and talents secure them a prosperous way of life. However, from the introduction, Mejido Costoya incites the reader to doubt these ingrained conceptions. Instead of approaching homelessness as an individual crisis, the book advocates for a systemic understanding of the problem.

According to Mejido Costoya, communities of faith and their organizations can advance the common good and social justice rather than a simplistic ideal of fairness, by emphasizing “care” (10-11). This value system allows FBOs to provide a holistic approach to their services and distinguish their work from secular organizations (Coleman, 243-4). Yet, the book is also critical of FBOs’ capacity to produce systemic change. Spickard, for instance, argues that religious charities “lack the power to address the structural conditions that produce homelessness in the first place” (65), whereas

Keywords: Faith-based organizations, religious charities, homelessness, unhoused people, poverty, social inequality, structural injustice, charity, religion and the United States, catholic social teaching
Stiver argues that, without addressing systemic racism, churches and religious organizations will focus on changing people instead of structures (153).

Avoiding a byzantine discussion of what entails an FBO, Mejido Costoya is concerned with the function and theology of arm’s-length faith-based nonprofits responding to homelessness today. Unlike local congregations whose model of care is rooted in volunteering and philanthropy, these FBOs follow a service-organizational model that enables them to provide social services and transform unjust systems (8-9). Hence, the book takes a more operational approach and theology is discussed here not to elucidate specific beliefs but to understand how it guides FBOs’ concrete practices.

The book is organized in three parts allowing the reader to comprehend how FBOs counteract neoliberal systemic structures around homelessness: I) through their work as part of civil society, II) through their practices, as informed by values and precepts, and III) through their theological understandings of homelessness. This division enables the reader to appreciate the complexities and nuances of homelessness and the moral, social, logistic, and economic challenges that FBOs face. At the same time, the deductive character of the book invites the reader to join the journey of these organizations from their role in broader society to a more intimate setting, for example, the work of homelessness ministries.

Part I explores how the United States has come to understand homelessness and the role that religion plays in it. It examines how the historical concept of homelessness had changed to be constructed as a social problem, how processes of gentrification disenfranchise an already vulnerable urban population, and how white supremacy and social injustice are pervasive in defining homelessness as an individual problem. At the same time, this first part analyzes how religious discourses, such as prosperity theology, shape neoliberal understandings towards homelessness, and how FBOs’ initiatives can counteract negative interpretations of unhoused people.

Part II provides compelling cases of how religious beliefs and practices within different traditions positively address homelessness by proposing a framework of inclusion. Chapters consider, for instance, how spiritual traditions of the Indigenous Coast Salish groups are integral to their community’s adjustment, and how a Muslim Café owner tackles homelessness by working collaboratively with an American Episcopal Church in a successful example of interfaith cooperation. Other chapters explore how parachurch organizations can combine ideas of citizenship and discipleship to confront homelessness, and how medieval kabbalistic discourse of exile,
Despite its ethnocentrism, does not alienates the unhoused or vulnerable.

Finally, by exploring theologies such as Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology, part III considers the actual effects of projects such as Googleville that promise to reduce homelessness. It also examines the activism, boundaries, and relationships that homeless ministries establish with unhoused people. It argues that homelessness is not only about the unhoused, but also about the housed and the indivisible relationships that bind them together. Thus, by highlighting personal stories, this part acknowledges and challenges the true motivation for housed people to help and work with those in need.

Although mainly focused on Christianity, the book is an invaluable contribution to communicating and understanding FBOs’ current contribution in creating new scenarios for homelessness. Furthermore, it is an invitation to see those who have often been unseen “in a crushingly dehumanizing context” (Blankenship, 293).