Welfare in America: Christian Perspectives on a Policy Crisis

Stanley W. Carlson-Thies and James W. Skillen, eds.

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The new welfare legislation enacted by the Congress and signed by the President in 1996 confirms the extent of public concern about our welfare policies. Some observers saw the President as delivering on his campaign pledge to "end welfare as we know it," but others saw the reforms as a betrayal of the interests of the poor. The insights in this book are as relevant to implementing the new policies and evaluating where they go wrong as they are to identifying important underlying flaws in the policies they replace.

The essays in this 600-page volume, written by professionals in several different fields, cover a wide range of subject matter. They are oriented toward broadening the context for thinking about welfare policy and exploring principles that should be applied. This focus is an outgrowth of a project of inquiry into the roots of America's welfare policy crisis, a project "designed to dig down to the religious and moral confusions underlying the paralysis and polarities concerning how to redress persistent poverty and urban degradation," using an approach "shaped by a conscious desire to be guided by biblical assumptions." Although the expertise and academic disciplines of the authors are quite diverse, they all apparently share Protestant Christian thought as their underlying frame of reference, and several draw heavily upon a distinct philosophical perspective within that tradition.

It is difficult to summarize the themes of 20 separate essays, and it is unfortunately not possible to do justice to each in a brief review. My goal is to convey the flavor of the book by commenting very briefly on the subject matter or perspective of each of the essays and then sketching out some of the main themes that are developed in the project.

The first two essays by Jean Elshtain and Max Stackhouse discuss the important role of families and religion in providing a sound basis for personal and civic well-being. Elshtain argues that instead of strengthening the ability of families to attain self-sufficiency, our welfare policies have weakened their role and subsidized the consequences. The family and

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other institutions, according to Stackhouse, should not be viewed as arising naturally in a value-free environment, with beneficent effects that are impeded only by the pressures of modern life. Instead, he maintains that their role—the family's constructive contribution to nurturing, disciplining, and instilling productive work habits in children, for example—is deeply rooted in religion. Both authors make use of the results of social science research, but their discussion is not limited by it. More important, their discussion illustrates why it is essential to look beyond the boundaries that are implicit in modern social science methods.

In one of the central essays of the book, James Skillen explores concerns about poverty and well-being in the context of the web of relationships we experience, the expectations we have of ourselves and each other, and the implications for responsibilities we need to assume. His reflections in this essay are a step toward fleshing out some of the ideas in the more abstract statement of principles for welfare policy, critiqued by John Tiemstra, that is included as an appendix.

While what it means to be human is a major focus in Skillen's essay, Lawrence Mead focuses more on the importance of a biblical understanding of human nature and the implications of such an understanding for thinking about how our responsibilities toward the poor should be carried out. Insights into the importance of institutions like family, church, and community and the need to help the poor to assume greater responsibilities for themselves seem consistent with important strands of biblical thought. But it is appropriate to recognize that many of these ideas were developed and gained broad recognition through creative joint efforts of religious and secular scholars.

In some instances, similar ground is covered in more than one essay. The central importance of religion for inculcating values, developing commitment, and structuring life is emphasized in different ways by Stackhouse, and by Ronald Sider and Heidi Rolland. John Mason uses a careful examination of scripture, especially Old Testament laws and the texture of community life, to develop principles applicable to the responsibilities of the citizenry and the poor, and Stephen Mott discusses broad biblical teachings that should shape our views on welfare policies. Stephen Monsma and Julia Stronks both discuss issues that are raised by parents' legitimate interests in integrating religious values with secular studies in their children's schools in the context of the difficulties that are posed by constitutional strictures against establishment of religion. The concept of welfare rights is discussed in an essay by Mary Ann Glendon that I found particularly interesting because of the distinctions it makes between the meaning of rights language in the United States and Europe, and by Paul Marshall who also provides useful information and additional important distinctions.

The subject matter of several essays is somewhat specialized, because they draw upon and reflect the academic discipline and work experience of their authors. Examples include essays by Bob Goudzwaard (European welfare state comparisons), Stephanie Collins (comparisons with Canadian experience), Mary Van Leeuwen (feminism, family structure, and poverty), Anne Hallum (third-world poverty in Guatemala), Cynthia Neal (child development), Mary Van Hook (rural poverty), Charles Glenn (accountability of schools), and Clarke Cochrane (health care). Several of the authors express policy preferences about welfare policy: Goudzwaard, for example, would like to see the policy emphasis shifted from economic growth to redistribution; Cochrane would like to see more emphasis in health activities on caring instead of curing. The preferences that are expressed are not always well grounded in the arguments that are put forward in the essays; however, sometimes this occurs because these preferences are much more specific than the surrounding discussion.

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The data that are presented on welfare and other issues were usually drawn from the work of well-known experts, and serious factual errors are not apparent. Some of the common presumptions that come up occasionally are subject to question, however. In some instances, for example, broad economic trends are portrayed as contributing to impoverishment, frustrating the goals of welfare policies. But this explanation for persistent or worsening poverty fails simple tests: the long-term trend in economic well-being in the U.S. has surely been upward, for example; and the absolute level of economic well-being of the poor in the U.S. compares favorably with Europe. Although this project was oriented toward probing deeply and examining underlying principles, empirical findings are often accorded a great deal of importance for affirming principles, like the importance of two-parent families. This is not necessarily inappropriate; informed discussion should be based on both sound principles and carefully developed facts.

One of the strengths of the book, in my view, is the recognition reflected in many of the essays that families play an indispensable role, that institutions like schools and churches afford essential support, and that poverty status is strongly influenced by behavior. The authors of the essays are not in general under the illusion that simply spending more money or fine-tuning the design of programs would by themselves greatly improve the conditions of life for many of the poor in contemporary U.S. society, even when changes of this sort may be appropriate. Consistent with their intention to examine fundamental underlying principles, the authors seem to share the insight that the wellsprings of renewal are deeper than can be addressed by simply expanding or tinkering with welfare-state type programs. The book affirms "a strong role for government in assisting the needy"; however, as Stanley Carlson-Thies puts it in his chapter summarizing the work, some of the authors suggest a "'new partnership' between government and religious social services."

Many of the principles that are discussed in the essays are sufficiently abstract that it is not easy to see how they should be applied to specific details of welfare policy. I regard this as inherent in the nature of the book, not as a criticism of its content. Readers should not expect to find reliable or detailed prescriptions for welfare policy in a book like this, or even to suppose that insights from the book lend themselves to any immediate policy application. They can benefit, however, from a much richer and more varied set of ideas and insights than it is possible for me to describe in this review.

As I read each essay in turn, I asked myself whether it contained the key to reforming welfare. Reflecting on this question reminded me of a children's book being read to one of my grandsons by his parents. This children's book asks on each successive page, with a hide-and-seek format, where the dog is. Is he behind the door? No. Is he under the bed? No. And so on. Finally, the last page asks: Is he in the basket? The answer is, yes. I didn't get a positive answer on the key to reforming welfare from any of the essays or from the book as a whole. But I recognize that it would be mistaken to think that providing such a key was the goal for the book—as mistaken as it would be to think that simply teaching the child the location of the lost dog was the goal of the children's book. In each case the goal is to stimulate thought, to develop ways of thinking about problems, and the essays in *Welfare in America* are as successful in achieving their goals as the pages of the children's book are for meeting theirs. ■