Religious Philanthropy at the Prayer Breakfast

Striving for Unity, Humility and the Love of Humanity

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There are many ways to define philanthropy, but at its most basic, philanthropy is the love of humanity. While faith is not an essential aspect of all philanthropy, it has served as the bedrock across millennia and it continues to be at the heart of much of people’s giving, volunteering, and service today.

Religion is a powerful force in shaping the world – for good and for ill. President Obama’s remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast last week caused a stir by reminding us of how faith can be twisted and distorted: the terror of the Islamic State (ISIS), religious civil wars in Nigeria and the Central African Republic, as well as a rising anti-Semitism and Islamaphobia in Europe. President Obama also rightly reminded us that religion distorted is nothing new. It has always been a part of our history from the violence of the medieval Crusades to religious justifications by some of American slavery. That is part of religion’s power, its ability to be employed so persuasively for good or evil.

While President Obama’s references to religion’s dark side have garnered the most attention, they served as only part of the equation. He also pointed to how we have seen “faith inspiring people to lift up one another – to feed the hungry and care for the poor, and comfort the afflicted and make peace where there is strife.”1 That is the potential power of religious philanthropy: leading to unity over division. While we cannot dismiss the fact that a small percentage of philanthropy garnered in the name of religion has been used for misanthropic ends, the vast majority has been used with the love of humanity in mind.

Despite the different tenets of the major religious traditions, all share a love of humanity. Our respective faiths inspire us to give beyond our individual communities to change the world. And it often leads us outside our particular contexts to join together for a common cause. Rarely do we cross the boundaries that separate us, but philanthropy is an ideal place for us to learn from one another. Religion’s power necessitates people of faith to approach the world and each other with humility. We may not have all the answers. We may even have some doubts, but our faith leads us to seek the love of humanity. And realizing what we share, we are able to work together to make the world a better place. I believe our shared value of philanthropy is a key in allowing for the love of humanity to take root. In learning from one another and working together around a common issue whether it be poverty, healthcare, human rights, or any number of issues, we are
putting philanthropy into practice as we get to know each other as real people over abstract categories. In a world that often highlights the perversion of true faith through examples of violence or intolerance, a shared sense of philanthropy stands to unite us. Serving alongside one another may give us opportunities to work together and the ability to know one another more deeply as fellow humans and as friends.

As President Obama articulated, “Whatever our beliefs, whatever our traditions, we must seek to be instruments of peace, and bringing light where there is darkness, and sowing love where there is hatred.” Acknowledging our need for one another, admitting a sense of humility, and announcing a shared hope in the common good may be the pressing need in our present global society; it might also be the key to successful philanthropy.

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