

Compromise

I can understand why Time Warner would partner with AOL. New markets. Bigger profits. These are the engines that drive business. But why would an organization such as The Salvation Army, driven by values not profits, get into “partnering”?

The obvious answer is that partnering makes it possible for the Army to do important things that it couldn't do on its own. As William Booth wrote in 1890: “All that I want is to have the work done....If you have any better plan than mine for effecting this purpose, in God's name bring it to the light and get it carried out quickly. If you have not, then lend me a hand with mine, as I would be only too glad to lend you a hand with yours if it had in it greater promise of successful action than mine.”

Booth set the pattern and gave the rationale, but was he naïve to think that the Army's partners would simply accept his plans holus bolus? Partners may have their own their own objectives that they want factored in. Consequently, the necessity to collaborate raises the question about the willingness to compromise.

Professor Charles Glenn of Boston University calls the Army's long and complex partnership with government an “ambiguous embrace.” On the one hand, he says, “the overarching theme of the Army's growth has been its willingness and ability to partner with the secular public to achieve common social objectives.” On

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the other hand, “shifts in the character of the Army’s social programs over the past three decades can in part be attributed to external pressures associated with government contracting.”

I will leave it to others to debate whether Professor Glenn’s analysis is factual. For me he raises the interesting question of whether and when compromise is ethical.

Two kinds of situation come to mind.

The first sort of compromise could be described as doing something bad but “unavoidable.” An acquaintance of mine is the chief fund-raiser for a large hospital. He tells me that one of the foundations he approaches requires him to file a budget that sets the costs of administration and fundraising impossibly low. He knows he can’t keep his overhead as low as they demand. He knows that they know it too. But every year he goes ahead and files a false budget. He doesn’t feel good about lying, but reasons that it’s the only way to get the funding, and to forgo the funding would be worse for the patients.

Some notable Christian theologians have said this kind of compromise is a necessity built into the fabric of our now-fallen world. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it: “the law of love is an impossible possibility...every achievement will remain in the realm of approximation. The ideal in its perfect form lies beyond the capacities of human nature...The ideal is qualified in any possible society by the necessities of social cohesion and corrupted by the sinfulness of men.” Our ethical responsibility

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on this view is to discern the lesser evil and rely on the assurance that God forgives us, and justifies us by our faith not our ethical purity.

Perhaps because of my holiness tradition that has taught that sinning is not necessary, this view is uncomfortable for me. (Which is not to say it's false.)

A second kind of compromise involves cooperating with a **partner** who is doing something wrong, and is in some respect aided in that wrongdoing by our partnership. Governments here in Canada, for instance, are the promoters and operators (as well as the regulators) of gambling. They want "good causes" to partner with them in using the gambling profits. The Army wouldn't have to run casinos itself, it would just have to lend its good name to the government that runs the casino. Another example: the same governments that would partner with the Army in delivering hospice care are simultaneously debating whether to legalize assisted suicide. Obviously our values diverge. Does that make partnership taboo?

Catholic ethics has dealt with this kind of situation by differentiating between "formal cooperation" (i.e. cooperation in which the partners jointly intend the evil act itself) and "material cooperation" (i.e. in which one's own intentions remain good). Formal cooperation is always unethical, they argue; but so long as the cause is important enough, material cooperation is sometimes permissible. The reason, on this view, is that each partner has its own moral accountability, and is not automatically tainted by the partner's shortfall.

This brief account doesn't say everything that could be said about the ethics of compromises. That wasn't the point. The point was that values-driven

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organizations like the Salvation Army need to scrutinize their partnerships from the standpoint of values, not just outcomes. Those who have to make the decision about whether partnership comes at an ethically acceptable price need wisdom.

The last word goes to Charles Glenn: "There is much to admire about the work of the Salvation Army, but equally admirable is their seriousness with which it is grappling with how to maintain its distinctive character and mission in the 'ambiguous embrace' of government and of the contributing public."

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14 February 2000

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