Food or Medicine: What Would God Choose?

by Demetria Martinez

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Would God back universal health care? In case you missed it, that?s the title of an op-ed piece that appeared in USA Today July 27 ? a marvelous overview of how the God of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims might weigh in on the health care debate.

Author Oliver Thomas, a minister and a lawyer, writes, ?Perhaps the truest thing I can say about the God of the Bible is that he is for the poor.? And today, millions of those poor in our country alone, he explains, are forced to choose between food and medicine, or are condemned to death because the cannot pay for life-saving procedures.

Beginning with the Torah, Thomas lays the groundwork for God?s concern for the poor, citing the infinite ways in which the Torah commands that we care for them. He then goes on to argue that care for the poor extends specifically to health care: an idea championed by none other than the legendary Jewish scholar and physician Maimonides.

Born in Spain in 1135, and considered the greatest Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, the peerless Maimonides placed health care first on his list of services that a city should offer its residents. Thomas does not find this to be a radical proposition. He quotes Rabbi David Saperstein, who was picked by New sweek as the most influential rabbi in America: ?We are constantly commanded not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbors,? Saperstein said, citing Leviticus. The Torah teaches that human life is of infinite value; health care for all stems from that teaching, the Rabbi explained.

On now to the teachings of Jesus, where a story of health care provision emerges in the parable of the Good Samaritan. A Samaritan traveler finds a gravely wounded man on the roadside. The Samaritan cares for his wounds and ?pays a substantial sum for his care and recovery,? Thomas writes. ?Jesus ends the

story by telling his hearers to ?go and do likewise.? At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus adds final instruction to those who might have lingering doubts about their responsibilities to their uninsured neighbors: `Love one another as I have loved you.??

As with the ot her two faiths? scriptures, the Holy Quran is filled with admonitions to care for the needy. And one story in particular is especially inspiring for those looking at health care through a faith-based lens.

Writes Thomas, ?One of the prophet Mohammed?s sayings, in particular, bears mention: `When a believer visits a sick believer at dawn, 70,000 angels keep on praying for him until dusk. If he visits him in the evening, 70,000 angels keep praying for him until morning, and he will have reaped rewards in paradise.?? Muslim scholar Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf elaborated upon the story. ?The Imam, says Thomas, ?tells me that if merely `visiting? the sick provides this kind of blessing, providing actual medical care?especially if the person is poor?would engender even greater rewards.?

Thomas reflects on the difficulties of achieving health care coverage for all, despite age, income or one?s condition. He does cite Cigna insurance executive turned whistle-blower, Wendell Potter; in testimony before congress he shook hearers, laying bare the ways in which insurance companies work to deny coverage to their clients. According to Thomas, Potter has suggested that our nearly half-century-old Medicare program has been an efficient choice for coverage, a model which might hold promise.

So where do we go from here? It?s up to our leaders to be savvy about the interests they are up against, and to make a choice to fight those for whom sick people are merely numbers, dispensable.

?Jesus admonished his disciples to be as innocent as doves,? says Thomas,? but he also warned them to be ?as wise as serpents.? Let?s hope Congress can be the same.?

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