

Bush backs "faith-based" programs: holy water for the social crisis in America

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The Bush administration's plan for a sharp increase in federal funding of social service programs run by religious institutions is both reactionary and fraudulent. It is an assault on the constitutional principle of separation of church and state, one of the fundamental tenets of American democracy. It is also a sham, since the social crisis in America dwarfs the resources and capabilities of church-based programs, no matter how well-intentioned.

The short-term political calculus of the initiative is obvious: it is a payoff to the Christian right groups which played such a critical role in Bush's capture of the Republican presidential nomination and his conquest, by means of fraud and the trampling of voting rights, of the presidential election. Hundreds of millions of federal dollars, if not billions, will flow into the coffers of the fundamentalist groups, many of them characterized by religious bigotry and racism.

Bush attempted to disguise this fact by holding the January 30 announcement of the program at a Christian school in a predominately black neighborhood in Washington DC. He was surrounded by black ministers, as well as a token rabbi, a Catholic nun, a Muslim cleric and, of course, Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate whose campaign last year featured frequent and unctuous invocations of religion.

The inclusiveness is purely symbolic. Rules for the "faith-based" programs issued the following day permit the religious institutions receiving funds to discriminate in employment (by hiring only co-religionists, or barring gay employees, for instance), and allow them to require specific religious practices—Bible reading, participation in prayer services or other forms of worship—as a condition of receiving aid.

While Bob Jones University, the notoriously racist and anti-Catholic college where Bush gave a speech during the Republican primary campaign, has not indicated any interest in enrolling in the new Bush program, nothing in

the rules would prohibit its participation.

Unlike current federal funding of church-based Head Start programs, soup kitchens and other charitable activities, religious groups given federal contracts under the Bush plan would be permitted to proselytize actively, seeking to turn aid recipients into converts. The only real restriction is that federal funds cannot be used for specifically religious purposes, i.e., buying Bibles, altars, crosses or other church paraphernalia.

Bush defended this policy as though it were an affirmation of civil rights. "Government, of course, cannot fund and will not fund religious activities," he said. "But when people of faith provide social services, we will not discriminate against them."

This stance contrasts sharply with the president's action only a week before, when he signed an executive order barring US government funds for family planning organizations internationally which provide information on abortion. Bush did not hesitate then to "discriminate," through a gag order that attacks the democratic rights of groups like Planned Parenthood.

Bush signed two executive orders Monday. The first created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, to be headed by University of Pennsylvania Professor John DiIulio. The second instructed five federal departments—Justice, Labor, Education, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services—to set up centers to promote collaboration between the federal government and church-based social service programs.

Bush also named former Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith, a top domestic policy adviser, to head the Corporation for National Service. Among his responsibilities will be the direction of AmeriCorps, the youth volunteer program established by the Clinton administration, which will be reoriented to funneling young people into working for church-based charities.

The appointment of DiIulio, a Catholic, and Goldsmith, the only high-ranking Jew in the administration, is a further cosmetic gesture to conceal Bush's alliance with the fundamentalists. But many non-fundamentalist religious groups have indicated reservations about the Bush plan. Significantly, neither Catholic Charities, the largest church-based social services organization, nor mainstream Protestant and Jewish groups sent representatives to the ceremony that launched the new initiative.

Civil liberties groups denounced Bush's plan. "This is going to be an all-out battle," said Joseph Conn, a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "A lot of people see this as one of the biggest violations of church-state separation that we've seen in American history."

Marc Stern of the American Jewish Congress said, "The government was funding a program where religion is built into the warp and woof. Religious indoctrination is the essence of the program, and we think the essence of the First Amendment is that government cannot fund that sort of effort."

There will be little or no opposition in Congress, which incorporated major concessions to religious groups in the 1996 welfare reform law that abolished Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The "charitable choice" provisions in that law, drafted and promoted by then-Senator John Ashcroft, Bush's choice for attorney general, included funding for church-based programs to provide job training, day care and counseling to former welfare recipients.

In Texas the state government headed by Bush used the 1996 law to provide grants to a jobs program run by a fundamentalist group which required participants to study scripture and taught them "to find employment through a relationship with Jesus Christ." A third of the program's students said they had been pressured to join a church or change their religious beliefs, according to a suit brought against the state of Texas by civil rights groups.

Bush claimed that church-based social services should receive federal aid because they were more effective than government programs, especially in such difficult tasks as the rehabilitation of prison inmates and drug addicts. It is debatable whether the transition from drug dependency to Pat Robertson's 700 Club represents much progress, either for the unfortunate individual or the wider society. But there is little evidence that such transformations are actually taking place, at least on the scale required to deal with widespread social maladies.

The new administration not only seeks to make government an instrument for promoting religion—in violation of over two centuries of constitutional precedent—it presents religion as the solution to deep-seated social evils created by the profit system. This not only credits religion with undue powers, it trivializes the problems of hunger, homelessness, drug abuse and crime.

Millions of people confront these social problems, not because they have turned away from god, as the Bible-thumpers would have it, but because they live in a capitalist society characterized by the grossest extremes of wealth and poverty. A tiny fraction of the population monopolizes the lion's share of the resources that have been produced by the labor of the entire working population. The victims of hunger, homelessness and drug abuse are drawn overwhelmingly from the ranks of the working people, most of whom are only a paycheck or two away from real deprivation.

When Ashcroft and other right-wing politicians declared in 1996 that churches would take up the slack after the abolition of the federal AFDC program, responsible church groups denounced the claim, pointing out that the combined resources of all religious charities amounted to less than 10 percent of annual federal spending on aid to the poor.

The disproportion between social need and resources is even more stark today. The \$20 billion which Bush proposes to funnel through religion-based charities over the next decade is less than what the federal government used to spend annually on AFDC alone.

The appeal to private charity has been the hallmark of capitalist regimes facing acute social crisis, and wishing to wash their hands of responsibility for alleviating mass suffering. This approach is especially cynical and sinister coming amid mounting signs of a sharp downturn in the US economy, with its inevitable toll of lost jobs, slashed incomes and increased social misery.



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