

Obama expands Bush's "faith-based" initiative

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President Barack Obama Thursday unveiled his administration's plans to expand both the scope and power of the "faith-based" initiatives that were introduced eight years ago by the Bush White House.

The plan calls not only for an increase in federal funding of social service programs run by religious institutions, but establishes a federal advisory board composed largely of religious officials to consult on how funding will be distributed and to help shape the administration's policies on issues such as abortion, AIDS and social welfare policies.

The proposal represents a significant escalation of the assault on the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state, one of the bedrock foundations of the American republic. This attack is all the more egregious given campaign pledges made by Obama—himself a former professor of constitutional law—to amend the most flagrant elements of the Bush administration's pandering to the Christian right.

The political calculations underlying the policy are obvious. It represents one more attempt to curry favor with the right-wing Christian churches that constituted a key constituency of the Bush administration and a further bowing to the Republicans.

The most significant element in Obama's announcement, made at a National Prayer Breakfast held at the Hilton hotel in Washington, was the apparent decision to leave in place a series of reactionary executive orders issued by Bush, including one that allows so-called faith-based groups to openly discriminate by refusing to hire anyone but their own believers to work in programs paid for with federal tax dollars or—as has frequently been the case—by denying employment to gays.

Also left in place is a 2002 executive order issued by

Bush decreeing that the constitution's guarantee of freedom of speech ensures that groups may receive federal taxpayer money "without impairing their independence, autonomy, expression or religious character." The thrust of this policy was to grant the churches the right to use federally funded programs to proselytize for their religion.

In announcing his White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships—whose last two words are changed from the title bestowed by the Bush administration—Obama declared: "The goal of this office will not be to favor one religious group over another—or even religious groups over secular groups. It will simply be to work on behalf of those organizations that want to work on behalf of our communities, and to do so without blurring the line that our founders wisely drew between church and state."

This is utter nonsense. The lines have not merely been blurred but largely obliterated by the policies implemented under the previous Republican administration that Obama is leaving undisturbed. Moreover, by creating a federal advisory council dominated by religious figures, the new Democratic administration is not only maintaining the flow of federal dollars into religious institutions—which in addition enjoy tax-free status—but is also giving them direct input into federal policy making.

On Thursday, 15 of the 25 members of the new advisory panel were named. Of these, 10 were religious figures and five were affiliated with secular social service organizations. Included among them are the Rev. Frank Page, president emeritus of the Southern Baptist Convention, which has openly defended its "right" to use federally funded programs for the purpose of proselytizing, and Joel Hunter, the Florida mega-church pastor who briefly headed the right-wing

Christian Coalition. Also included is Richard Stearns, president of World Vision, an organization that insisted under the Bush presidency that it should not be compelled to hire non-Christians.

As the *Washington Post* pointed out, "Some religious groups argued at the time that they could use taxpayer-funded programs to help people out of poverty and addiction by teaching them about God and salvation."

During Bush's eight years in office, an estimated \$10.6 billion were doled out to faith-based nonprofit organizations run by religious institutions.

The faith-based office is to be headed by Joshua DuBois, described by the *Post* as a "26-year-old Pentecostal who worked on religious issues for the Obama campaign." DuBois will direct a staff of 50 government employees.

Also to be maintained are 11 "faith-based" offices that the Bush administration set up in various federal government agencies, including the departments of Justice, Labor, Education, Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services.

The *Post* quoted unnamed White House officials as saying that the "top priorities for the office will be interfaith relations, strengthening the role of fathers in society and reducing poverty" and developing "policies aimed at reducing the number of abortions."

The American Civil Liberties Union issued a statement condemning the expansion of the faith-based operation in Washington: "What we are seeing today is significant—a president giving his favored clergy a governmental stamp of approval. There is no historical precedent for presidential meddling in religion—or religious leaders meddling in federal policy—through a formal government advisory committee made up mostly of the president's chosen religious leaders."

The failure to overturn the Bush administration's executive orders giving government sanction for faith-based discrimination in federally funded programs represents a repudiation of pledges made by Obama during the 2008 election campaign.

Speaking in Zanesville, Ohio last July, the candidate Obama declared, "If you get a federal grant, you can't use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can't discriminate against them or against the people you hire on the basis of their religion."

Now that he has been elected, however, it appears that indeed you can. The climb-down is undoubtedly

driven by Obama's fear of antagonizing the Christian right.

There is another and equally reactionary element in Obama's faith-based initiative. It is the perpetuation of the conception that religion is the answer to the catastrophic social conditions that are being created by the historic crisis of the profit system and the related retrograde prejudice that poverty, unemployment and homelessness are somehow bound up with moral failings.

Finally, there is the attempt to promote religious-run charities as suitable substitutes for federal social programs that have been cut to the bone over the past three decades. This myth has been promoted since Ronald Reagan's presidency, persisting through George H.W. Bush's "thousand points of light" and perpetuated by Clinton as he ended "welfare as we know it."

The reality is that the religious institutions—even after taking in more than \$10 billion in tax dollars—had nowhere near the resources required to make up for federal budget cuts, even before the onset of the present economic cataclysm.

The promotion of this myth under the current conditions of rising mass unemployment is all the more cynical and is an indication that the Obama administration, like its predecessors, plans to do little or nothing to alleviate the immense social misery that is being generated by capitalism.



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