

Faith-Based Public Policy: A Defense*

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Religious freedom has been one of the most closely guarded traditions of the American lifestyle. Although litigation on this matter has become popular only within the last sixty years, the protection for citizens to think and believe as they choose has been held high since the formation of our nation. Our Constitution affords us two conflicting clauses: the Establishment Clause, which prohibits the government from purposefully establishing one religion or denomination over another; and the Free Exercise Clause, which allows all citizens of the United States to worship whatever they believe however they choose. The words of Thomas Jefferson in his letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1802 have been commonly added to the discussion to suggest “a wall of separation between church and state.”

This metaphor, however familiar, is weak. Interaction occurs between religious groups and government on a daily basis. These groups exist within an area governed by local, state, and national authorities and are composed of members who live under that same federal system. Maintenance of streets and roads in front of churches, building regulations on mosques, and mortgage payments for synagogues all involve governmental interaction of some type. Thus, a true wall of separation is quite impossible.

With this in mind, the government has created a system that, with a few exceptions, treats these groups equally. This parity exists not only with others in the sphere of “religious organizations,” but with secular organizations of the same type as well. Theoretically, any resource that is available to a secular association is available to a religious one, and vice versa. Bible clubs are just

as welcome to meet in public parks as are school-based youth organizations. Students at Cedarville University, which is Baptist affiliated, are just as entitled to Federal Parents Plus Loans as are students at Ohio State University. When religious organizations provide some type of social service, this equality is also supposed to hold true, with both religious and secular groups having equal footing for government money. The hope is that if all possibilities are given equal opportunity, the government is able to allow citizens to believe and receive services from whomever they wish without explicitly promoting or hindering any particular group.

Unfortunately, theory is far from reality. Faith-based and community organizations are often at a disadvantage when trying to obtain the government funds that they are justly entitled to. This not only robs our communities of valuable services but creates de facto inconsistency between our government's mandates and its actions. Fortunately, notice has been taken. In 2001, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was created by executive order. Shortly after this event, offices of the same type began to appear within individual states, most notably in Ohio. These offices offer a unique service. By focusing specifically on groups that are often unable to obtain government monies for effective, but often overlooked community services, Faith-Based and Community Initiatives not only helps communities provide high quality social services but also returns equilibrium to an otherwise slanted and unconstitutional funding system.

Religious groups have a long history in the area of social welfare. The early programs in America that dealt directly with issues such as impoverished widows and children involved personal participation and faith in God.¹ Since then, many have recognized the inherent moral aspect of social and human services.² Minority churches have shown an exceptional willingness to become involved in their communities.³ The creation of Charitable Choice and programs like it has made funds more accessible to faith-based organizations.⁴ Both Al Gore and George W. Bush used support and expansion of faith-based policy as an anchor for their presidential campaigns.⁵ Faith-based issues became even more popular after Bush took office.⁶ We now see a wide range of possibilities for faith-based groups to obtain government money.

However, not everyone who examines the problem of social welfare sees faith-based initiatives as a solution or even our current social situation as a problem. Some see social problems such as out-of-wedlock births to be nothing more than a sign of our evolving societal values.⁷ Some believe that the states by themselves are too conservative and slow moving. Therefore, the problem of correcting social services should be left to the federal government.⁸

Fear exists that legal frameworks such as Charitable Choice damage religious freedom.⁹ The purpose of this article is to show that these positions do not take a proper perspective. Problems that touch the most intimate and personal areas of human society require the most intimate and personal solutions. Faith-based initiatives help make these solutions possible.

The necessity of faith-based initiatives is first derived from the pervasive belief within American culture that everyone deserves an equal starting place.¹⁰ This idea is the very essence of democracy, displayed in the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth

Amendment and upheld in such Supreme Court cases as *Mitchell v. Helms* and *United States v. Virginia*. Just as no individual is to be favored under the law, no organization will be privy to special treatment either—monetarily or otherwise.

However, when it concerns faith-based organizations, law is far from practice. Although technically equal, these smaller organizations are not receiving their fair share of government funding. In its 2001 fiscal year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) granted 25.6 billion dollars to nonprofit groups, but only 2.4 billion dollars of that money was awarded to faith-based organizations.¹¹ Of the 6 billion dollars that the Department of Labor awarded to nonprofits in 2000, only 800 million, roughly 13 percent, went to faith-based groups.¹² This disparity is not because faith-based organizations are providing an inferior service or are in some other way unworthy of being awarded the money but because they lack the knowledge, time, or resources to make a worthwhile attempt at it. Larger public service organizations, such as the American Cancer Society and KinderCare have been receiving funds for many years and are deeply rooted in our bureaucracy. Their staffs are large and well trained in the process of obtaining funds. Smaller faith-based groups often lack these resources, thus putting them at a severe disadvantage.

One can look at Rachel's House in Columbus, Ohio, as an example. This is a small halfway-style home for female ex-offenders. To date, none of the women who have completed the Rachel's House program have returned to prison. Despite this amazing service record, their ministry is very small. Only nine women are in the program at any given time, and each client's program is individually tailored to her needs. Therefore, it is not surprising that Rachel's House is not receiving federal grants. Their mission would suffer more from the time that is taken away from their clients to become educated and experienced in obtaining grants than it does now in working without them.

Rachel's House and other groups like it must overcome three successive obstacles to become successful competitors for government grants. First, they must become informed about the variety of funds that are available to non-profit and social-welfare groups. Second, they must be convinced that their status as a faith-based organization will not prevent them from receiving these funds, nor will they be forced to change the goals or methods of their ministry to continue receiving them. Third, they must be properly educated in how to present themselves as effective competitors for the available money. Faith-Based and Community Initiatives provides the information and education necessary for faith-based organizations to overcome these three hurdles and compete on level ground with larger and more experienced groups.

The other need for faith-based initiatives arises from the fact that our government's system of purchasing social services does not create an effective environment in which our social problems can be solved. In 2004, the Department of Health and Human Services spent well over 540 billion dollars on its programs, a number that will increase by nearly 100 billion dollars by 2006.¹³ Yet, with all of this money available, 1.5 million children have either a mother or father in prison, 15 million children are classified as "at risk," and more than one in six families that have children have a family income of less than 17 thousand dollars per year.¹⁴ The problem lies not in the amount being spent but in the way that it is spent.

A great deal of this problem is rooted in the fact that when government became involved in social assistance, they created what we now call "social work." Social work, has, since its inception, been shaped by the corporate mentality of government.¹⁵ Much like J. P. Morgan or your neighborhood Dairy Queen, national offices are looking for the best possible return on their investments. To manage investment costs, programs are often created to affect large numbers of people in generic ways. Welfare, for instance, was created in 1935 to ease the suffering of the Great Depression and survived until the early 1990s. The program was able to provide billions of dollars to needy families during its sixty-year existence by keeping its requirements and benefits very basic. To qualify, one simply had to show financial need and dependence. The benefits were even more rudimentary. In most cases, a check was sent to program members every month with little or no care as to how that money was spent. Each recipient was assigned to a case worker, who was often overloaded and simply responsible for making sure that those in the program continued to meet the requirements and receive their checks.¹⁶ Similar situations existed and continue to exist in other governmental service groups where individuality of criteria and care are sacrificed for the sake of reaching a wider audience.

Unfortunately, this way of purchasing social services is often ineffective. To continue with welfare as an example, by the late 1980s, the program had lost its effectiveness. The terms *welfare queen* and *poverty pimp* were becoming common in a system where there was no monetary advantage to those attempting to work toward a better life.¹⁷ The amount of governmental assistance was inversely proportional to income earned by a struggling family through employment.¹⁸ For instance, a person who worked twenty hours per week and earned 100 dollars would, in turn, lose 100 dollars per week from their government assistance. Those who worked had the same net income as those who did not.

During this time, there was also a change in society's value of work. During welfare's earlier days, many Americans derived personal and social value from their ability to work hard and spend modestly, thereby acquiring wealth. To be an able-bodied person without work was disgraceful.¹⁹ Therefore, a person on welfare would be pressured to become self-sustaining as quickly as possible. As time passed, culture became increasingly accepting of people from all types of backgrounds and economic status. Civil rights and other areas of social equality thrived in this environment, but much of the social pressure for one to better his or her way of life was erased. It became increasingly acceptable to receive assistance, leading many to conclude that they would do better not to work at all and simply live off of government money. By the early 1990s, it had become widely accepted that welfare had to change.²⁰

Government alone is unable to properly resolve the problems that we face. Superficial solutions cannot unravel problems that are deeply embedded into the lives of citizens in need. This is where the advantage of faith-based organizations lie. These groups partner with government to offer a "holistic" approach to their clients' problems, assisting them emotionally and psychologically, not just physically or financially. Those who take full advantage of faith-based programs are bound by a common thread: They have been taught that bettering their situation is not simply a process of obtaining material goods; it is a process of reevaluating one's worth as a person and using that individual worth to add to the value of society as a whole. These individuals are preparing themselves for a better life, not simply a more comfortable existence.

This approach is working. Charitable Choice, one of the programs that replaced welfare in 1996 set out specifically to create new relationships between government and faith-based organizations. As of 1999, a study by Amy Sherman showed that 125 financial and nonfinancial relationships had been created in nine states. As she mentioned, although this number is not tremendous, it is merely a sample and still signifies thousands of individuals

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who are benefiting from these programs.²¹ This number has no doubt risen since her report. Other groups have seen similar and even greater success on a more individual basis. Teen Challenge, a faith-based drug rehabilitation organization that was given political protection in Texas during George W. Bush's tenure as governor, is using a combination of foundational grants and private support to reach at-risk youth and young adults in all fifty states, Puerto Rico, and nearly sixty other countries around the world.²² In Southern California alone, 200,000 people are served in some fashion by a Teen Challenge center, with nearly 600 volunteers giving more than 57,000 hours to help those in need.²³ A recent study done by Northwestern University found that of those who completed the Teen Challenge program, 86 percent have remained drug free.²⁴

Faith-based organizations are proving to be successful when given the opportunity. Herein lies the niche of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives: They help provide that opportunity. In coming alongside, they provide direction, education, and opportunity to these highly effective groups. This not only helps maximize our tax dollars but also improves communities and produces more fulfilled citizens.

Two Common Concerns

Concerns still appear when discussing the topic of faith-based initiatives. The first of these is usually constitutional, claiming that these initiatives violate the Establishment Clause. However, this concern cannot be valid because the very purpose of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives is to level a field where, up until now, secular organizations have seen little threat. If anything, faith-based initiatives disestablish a longstanding tradition of inequality.²⁵ Closely related is the concern that all faith-based initiatives provide little more than a funding opportunity for churches. This is avoided by carefully engineered "rules of engagement" that inform organizations of what they can and cannot do with money they receive from the government. Some of these provisions include keeping accounting books for the organization separate from that of the religious group organizing it, an expectation of "this worldly" progress, and requirements that all strictly religious activities of the organization be voluntary. These stipulations protect taxpayers from paying for proselytizing while maintaining the mission and dignity of the organization receiving the money.

Opportunities for Future Research

The foremost need for the future of faith-based initiatives is high quality research on what each state is spending on faith-based organizations. The Ohio Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was created with the guidance of a bipartisan task force that examined the amount of funding that the state directed toward faith-based organizations in 2001. However, their research was far too inclusive, adding such groups as Good Samaritan Hospital in Cleveland, a purely secular organization with a religious name, to the list of organizations with a true faith-based mission. Their final report concluded that the state spent well over 800 million dollars per year on faith-based organizations, an obvious miscalculation.²⁶ The Ohio office is currently conducting more thorough research, attempting both to gain a more accurate perspective of the money being spent by the state every year and the background and results of faith-based organizations throughout the state.

Another topic that demands continued research is that of the effectiveness of faith-based initiatives in various states. Although the Ohio office was created with bipartisan legislation, many of the other offices throughout the nation were created by executive order, giving them varying amounts of power and restriction. Each state's program should be studied individually and compared to other states to continually improve the system. When one state is found to be successful, their methods should be shared and reviewed for conceivability in other states. This will help to keep the system fresh and adjusting to our changing society.

Notes

- * The authors would like to thank Kathryn Sanicky, Mark Caleb Smith, and Gerson Moreno-Riaño for their contributions to this article.
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- 2. See Andrew Dobelstein, *Moral Authority, Ideology, and the Future of American Social Welfare* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1999); Olasky, *Renewing American Compassion*; and John Roth, *Private Needs, Public Selves* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
- 3. George Gallup, "Religion in America: Will the Vitality of Churches Be the Surprise of the Next Century?" *Public Perspective* (November 1995): 4.

4. See Ronald J. Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruh, "No Aid to Religion? Charitable Choice and the First Amendment," in *What's God Got to Do with the American Experiment?* ed. E. J. Dionne Jr. and John J. Dilulio (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2000).
5. See E. J. Dionne Jr., "The Third Stage: New Frontiers of Religious Liberty," in *What's God Got to Do with the American Experiment?*
6. See Anne Farris, et al., "The Expanding Administrative Presidency: George W. Bush and the Faith-Based Initiative," *The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy*, August 2004; Amy Black, et al., *Of Little Faith: The Politics of George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004); Jo Renee Formicola, et al., *Faith-Based Initiatives and the Bush Administration: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).
7. Christine Bachrach, "Welfare, the Family, and Reproductive Behavior; Research Perspectives," in *Changing Circumstances of Marriage and Fidelity in the United States*, ed. Robert Moffitt (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998), 29.
8. Nancy Ellen Rose, *Workfare or Fair Work: Women, Welfare, and Government Work Programs* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 179.
9. See Melissa Rogers, "The Wrong Way to Do Right: A Challenge to Charitable Choice," in *What's God Got to Do with the American Experiment?*; Americans United Brochure at http://www.au.org/site/DocServer/The_Faith_Based_Initiative.pdf?docID=111.
10. See J. R. Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
11. "Unlevel playing field," available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/08/unlevelfield2.html>.
12. Ibid.
13. Health and Human Services Budget for FY2006 (accessed July 8, 2005): available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2006/hhs.htm>
14. "Rallying the Armies," available at [http://www.cpjustice.org/stories/storyReader\\$381](http://www.cpjustice.org/stories/storyReader$381).
15. Ram Cnaan and Gaynor I. Yancey, "Our Hidden Safety Net," in *What's God Got to Do with the American Experiment?*, 153.
16. See Star Parker, *Pimps, Whores, and Welfare Brats: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
17. Ibid.

18. Robert Lerman, "Increasing the Employment and Earnings of Welfare Recipients," in *Welfare Reform: An Analysis of the Issues*, ed. Isabell Sawhill (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1995). Accessed August 1, 2005, available from <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=306620>.
19. Welfare History Web site, available from http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/brial4_3.html#welfare.
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21. Sherman's executive summary at [http://www.cpjustice.org/stories/storyreader\\$315](http://www.cpjustice.org/stories/storyreader$315).
22. U.S. directory is at <http://www.teenchallengeusa.com/locations.html> and International directory is at <http://www.globaltc.org/pages/directory/frame.htm>
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24. Brooklyn Web site at <http://teenchallengeusa.com/brooklyn/about.html>.
25. "Unlevel playing field," available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/08/unlevelfield3.html>
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