

Faith No More

The Bush Administration has proven once and for all that church and state must be kept far apart. A response to Mary Jo Bane.

Discussions about the role of faith in specific political decisions, as distinct from the general “faithiness” embodied by the phantom crucifix in Governor Mike Huckabee’s now-forgotten Christmas campaign commercial, have been conspicuous by their absence from the recent presidential primary campaign. Although nearly all of the Democratic and Republican candidates have spoken in glowing terms about the importance of faith in public life, they have avoided addressing the complexities and pitfalls of using personal faith as a guide to public policy.

These are omissions with potentially serious consequences, because George W. Bush’s most important legacy may be a Supreme Court only one vote away from endorsing Associate Justice Antonin Scalia’s absurd assertion, in *McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky*, that the Constitution protects monotheists but permits “disregard of polytheists and believers in

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unconcerned deities, just as it permits the disregard of devout atheists.” But no one is talking about this, because secularism—for Democrats and Republicans—has become a dirty word.

For those who understand the gravity of the church-state separation issues in this election, it is therefore tempting to overlook the modest and seemingly reasonable argument on behalf of increased government support for faith-based social programs made by John DiIulio, Jr., in his recently published *Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America’s Faith-Based Future*, and supported by Mary Jo Bane in the last issue as “a plan rooted in principle, not politics” and an “attractive vision” of a “faith-friendly civil society” [“Keeping the Faith,” Issue 7]. But friendly to which faiths? And at what cost to the religious neutrality mandated by the world’s first secular Constitution?

DiIulio, the first director of Bush’s White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and a Roman Catholic, resigned from his White House job in less than a year because he did not think that the Bush Administration was delivering on its promises to foster “compassionate conservatism.” His book is, in part, a brief in support of what he would have liked to accomplish in his White House job. It is an idealistic manifesto for targeted grants to urban churches committed to addressing social problems, such as the plight of families left behind by the disproportionate number of African-American men in prison. Such programs, Bane argues, “are not casual, relatively low-interaction weekend activities like soup kitchens and clothing drives . . . Rather, they rely on a smaller number of motivated volunteers to spend the immense amount of time needed to build the sort of committed, respectful, one-on-one relationships that are crucial to the programs’ success.” Who but someone with a heart of stone could argue against federal grants for African-American churches whose volunteers wish to mentor the children of African-American prisoners?

Nevertheless, I will try. *Godly Republic*, and Mary Jo Bane’s stated sympathy with the faith-based initiatives detailed in it, are perfect examples of the failure by so many well-intentioned, moderate religious believers to acknowledge the existence of a slippery slope that begins with seemingly small violations of the separation of church and state. Bane accepts DiIulio’s premise that “secular concerns over an erosion of church-state divisions could be overcome by forbidding discrimination in service provision and hiring along with requiring that public funds be both scrupulously accounted for and segregated so that they are not used for religious purposes.” But it defies common sense to think that money paid to religious institutions can somehow be restricted to non-religious activities.

Faith-based social funding, initiated during the Clinton Administration but vastly expanded and politicized under Bush, cannot be separated from the overall attempt by the religious right to hack away at the wall of separation between church and state, until no one remembers that the Constitution was intended not only to protect religion from government interference, but to protect government from religious interference.

And while the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives may be out of the news, the conservative effort to expand faith-based funding in all federal programs is expanding. According to a recent analysis published by *Roll Call*, earmarked grants to proselytizing religious organizations can be found throughout the federal budget. Earmarks by individual members of the House and Senate, which avoid the usual vetting process that takes place when organizations apply through a government agency, are particularly capricious (and often inserted into the budget at the last minute to avoid scrutiny by the public or Congress).

One of the most recent earmarks, finally withdrawn, was the brainchild of Senator David Vitter of Louisiana, who had sneaked in \$100,000 for two religious organizations promoting the teaching of creationism in public schools. Many other earmarks, totaling more than \$500,000 over the past few years, have benefited Teen Challenge, a right-wing Christian drug rehabilitation program. The program encourages conversion to fundamentalist Christianity as a way of maintaining sobriety. Teen Challenge's founder, the Reverend David Wilkerson, has described Jewish teenagers who have converted to Christianity as "completed Jews." World Impact, an organization with an explicit mission statement endorsing fundamentalist Christian proselytizing, receive \$1.9 million last year. These are our tax dollars at work.

But earmarks are only the tip of the iceberg, because a great deal of federal money, for both secular and religious organizations, has been allotted by the Bush Administration on the basis of the groups' willingness to sign on to a right-wing religious agenda for the delivery of medical and social services. Since the beginning of Bush's first term, domestic and international grants for social services have gone disproportionately to Christian organizations—and especially to right-wing Christian groups that provided the Republican political base in the 2000 and 2004 elections. A 2006 survey by the *Boston Globe* found that 98.3 percent of international grants, administered through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), had gone to Christian-led organizations. By law, under a bill passed in 2003, one third of appropriations for AIDS prevention must be spent on abstinence-only programs that do not discuss birth control or distribute condoms. Some of these grants go to traditional religious institutions, like the Roman Catholic church, that agree with

the Bush Administration’s pro-abstinence, anti-condom policies. Others go to newer evangelical organizations. But it is extraordinary that such a large chunk of money—\$1 billion over five years—is reserved for a health approach favored by particular religious groups for reasons of religious dogma.

What is unclear, because so many groups are involved and AIDS appropriations are sometimes linked with broader health grants, is how much of the remaining AIDS budget is also being spent for abstinence-only programs. Funding for long-established secular charitable groups like CARE dropped steadily after Bush took office—from \$138 million in fiscal year 2001 to \$96 million in 2005. In 2006, a CARE contract to fight AIDS in Africa and Asia was canceled and replaced by a program of grants for faith-based organizations. Focus on the Family, the ultra-right group headed by James Dobson, called USAID a “liberal cancer” for having ever allocated grants to secular organizations committed to distributing condoms and working with prostitutes—major vectors of AIDS in the third world.

But the push for faith-based money from religious organizations on the far right (as distinct from mainstream institutions, like the Roman Catholic

church, that maintained large-scale charitable endeavors before there was any government money up for grabs) is not the only issue. There is no social science research indicating that religious organizations do a better job of delivering social services than secular organizations, although that unsupported assumption is taken by many faith-based funding advocates as gospel, so to speak (though not DiIulio, who concentrates much more on the sincerity and dedication of religiously motivated volunteers). Furthermore, according to polls by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, a majority of Americans believe that either secular organizations or the government can do a better job of providing social services ranging from combating teen pregnancy to feeding the homeless—even though the public supports the general concept of faith-based funding.

Many enthusiasts for faith-based funding try to enlist the founders on behalf of a closer relationship between religion and government (although the faith brigade conveniently ignores the fact that the framers deliberately wrote a constitution that does not mention God.). But however one interprets the founders’ religious beliefs, it is useless to look to their “original intent” for guidance on such matters, because the iconic eighteenth-century politicians never envisioned

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a society in which the federal government would spend billions of dollars on any social programs. In 1786, the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom—the first state law separating church and state—turned on the issue of tax support for the teaching of religion in schools. The law prohibiting tax expenditures for that purpose, strongly supported by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, was passed overwhelmingly—and the Virginia religious freedom act became the template for the secular provisions of the federal constitution, including Article 6, which prohibited all religious tests for public office, and the subsequent First Amendment to the Bill of Rights. Whatever the founders would have thought, there can be no doubt that much of the push for faith-based funding today comes from churches themselves—though not from mainline Protestants and most Jews, who tend to see taxpayer funding as a threat to religion as well as government.

African-American churches, it should be noted, have been among the strongest supporters of faith-based funding. I spoke about this subject some years ago with the Reverend Carlton Veazey, an African-American Baptist pastor in Washington for many years and now president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Veazey points out that it would have been tough for southern black churches to take a leading role in the civil rights movement had they been dependent on a government faith-based dole in the 1950s and 60s. Indeed, fear that government would corrupt religion was the reason why nineteenth-century Virginia Baptists joined with freethinkers like Jefferson and Madison to prohibit the use of tax funds for the teaching of religion in the state's public schools. Whatever the century, it seems obvious that any organization—religious or secular—may be subject to pressure when it takes money from other sources.

It is naïve to suggest, as DiIulio and Bane do, that government funding can be strictly monitored so that it will be used only for social services and not for proselytizing. One of the reasons why religious institutions engage in charitable endeavors is that charity helps spread their faith. That is not a criticism but a historical reality. In spite of their good intentions, faith-based funding supporters like DiIulio and Bane ignore a larger reality: that such funding is just one weapon in the larger effort to promote greater overall entanglement between government and religion. The push for state support for charter schools and federal tax vouchers for private schools—which, in most instances, means religious schools—is another example of the same phenomenon. The effect on public schools, if vouchers were to be legalized throughout the country, would be devastating.

Voices like those of Bane, DiIulio, and Jim Wallis, the author of *God's Politics*, have become increasingly influential within the Democratic Party, whose candidates have been urged to take back religious issues from the Republicans by emphasizing socially progressive values rooted in religious faith. That is the reason we have heard a great deal of talk about personal faith from Democratic candidates so far, and nothing at all about the separation of church and state. I doubt that any serious Democratic candidate today would be willing to raise any questions about the constitutionality or practical utility of faith-based programs. That is a mistake, because faith-based funding under a Democratic administration will surely fall into some of the same traps that it has under Bush.

It would be wrong, and contrary to America's historical traditions, to suggest that religion should be excluded from public life. But there are many ways to define "public" that do not involve feeding at the government trough. Moral leadership is most effective, as it was during the civil rights movement, when it speaks truth to power from outside the government power structure. Both church and state are degraded when tax dollars are spent—as they have been and inevitably will be—to promote a specific religious agenda in the guise of promoting the general welfare. ▀