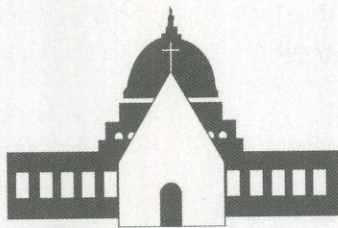


# State, Meet Church. Church, State.



By P. J. O'Rourke

**E**very politician experiences mindless brainstorm. LBJ had the Great Society—now late great. Reagan was intent on Star Wars, a technology he'd discovered reading X-Men comic books. Clinton proposed health-care reform—medical treatment delivered by the government with the same zealous efficiency with which the government delivers mail. Now, from the thoughtless cogitation of George W. Bush comes the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. In an executive order, Bush decreed that the OFBCI shall “eliminate unnecessary legislative, regulatory and other bureaucratic barriers that impede effective faith-based...efforts to solve social problems.”

This means religious charities will be eligible to run tax-funded government programs no matter how religious the charities are. They can keep the homeless up all night singing hymns at the shelter. They can refuse to feed the hungry at the soup kitchen because it's the Ramadan fast and they're supposed to be hungry. They can festoon their day-care centers with pictures of Beelzebub sacrificing naked virgins. Because Satanism is a religion, isn't it? Religion is “belief in and reverence for supernatural power accepted as the creator and governor of the universe,” says Webster's. I look forward to all sorts of amusement as the snake-handling fundamentalists of West Virginia distribute free rattlers to drug addicts.

Unfortunately, that won't happen. What will happen is a plethora of lawsuits. John Dilulio, Bush's head of OFBCI, actually digs this. “We ought to sue each other,” Dilulio says. “Because when Americans are serious about something, they will sue each other. So we ought to sue each other until we drop. And when the suing is over,” Dilulio continues, “let the message go forth that...we found a way to find common ground.”



Finding common ground with DiIulio himself, however, is no easy matter. A blue-collar Democrat with a Ph.D. in political science, Dilulio was the policy wonk behind mandatory-minimum prison sentences for drug offenders and the man who coined the phrase “superpredators” for the ghetto youth whom Dilulio described as “fatherless, godless and without conscience.” Then Dilulio, in an apparent attempt to exhibit some conscience of his own, got involved with inner-city religious congregations and became a convert to “faith-based initiatives.” Having sent everyone to jail, he now wants to send everyone to church.

Or something. It’s hard to tell what Dilulio means to do. “We’re not talking about giving government money to religious groups,” he told Bryant Gumbel. “We’re talking about making it possible for groups that are out there performing valued social services to compete....”

Can the Catholic Church compete for the \$176.5 million in government funding that Planned Parenthood received in 1999? “Your abortion procedure will take nine months to complete.”

Faith-based initiatives (which is almost impossible to say if you’ve been into the communion wine) get religion involved in government. I foresee problems with NASA launches blowing the wings off angels and spewing rocket-fuel fumes on the Pearly Gates. And faith-based initiatives get government involved in religion. Why not in bowling, bridge clubs, pet care and all the other nongovernmental aspects of life? Do you realize there’s no Cabinet-level position responsible for hooking you up on a Saturday night?

Government involvement—no matter how much red tape Bush snips—means grant applications to scribble, forms to blot, reports to hunt-and-peck at. Federal bumf-juggling will drain sources from volunteer agencies. To make up for that, the government will give the volunteers cash. Except, as Dilulio mentioned, it won’t. Bush’s faith-based initiatives plan contains no money for increased social services. In fact, there’s some un-money involved, at least from a general revenue perspective. Bush will introduce legislation allowing people who don’t itemize their taxes to deduct up to \$500 for charitable contributions. Who won’t? “There’s the twenty-five cents I gave the drunk panhandler last winter, plus five dollars to the big guy outside the sports arena who ‘watched my car,’

plus the pennies in the Save the Lemmings jar at the health-food store. That’s...\$500!”

And here’s the really bad news: Government red tape is a good thing. Niggling regulations, overfed bureaucracies and endless paperwork are what keep the brute force of government in check. The U.S. Army is powerful. The Salvation Army is not. The Salvation Army already receives eighteen percent of its funding from the government. Red tape prevents those street-corner Santas from being drafted into the regular Army and sent to stand with their kettles on the boulevards of Kosovo. When a politician promises to cut red tape, he’s promising to let government run wild. (Although this can be hard to remember when the DMV insists that you produce proof of chickenpox vaccination and spell *rhinoceros* before they’ll register your car.)

And what kind of charity is this, anyhow, where you give away other people’s money instead of your own? Faith-based initiatives are part of an ugly trend in modern philanthropy that confuses hogging at the federal trough with altruism. Lutheran Services in America currently gets thirty-nine percent of its budget from the government. For Catholic Charities, the figure is sixty-two percent. These congregations are giving until it hurts—me. Those are my tax dollars they’re paving their way to heaven with.

The liberal Americans United for Separation of Church and State opposes faith-based initiatives; so does the conservative Heritage Foundation, so does the libertarian Cato Institute, and so, as a matter of fact, does Pat Robertson. When you find all of these people in bed together on a matter of faith—you’d better pray.

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