

Undoing the New Deal

There is growing interest in President Bush's call for "faith based initiatives." The idea is to create partnerships between government and religious groups to help people in need. The idea is not entirely new. In 1996 when then President Bill Clinton signed the Welfare Reform Act, a "charitable choice" provision was included that made it possible for faith groups to compete for government grants to provide certain social services. The provision required that these religious groups form separate and secular non-profit entities to administer these services.

But President Bush's plan goes far beyond this. He wants faith groups to function as faith groups. That means funding with tax dollars purely religious activities such as Bible studies and preaching conversion. In fact, this is one of the stated motivations driving his faith based initiatives. There is a presumed belief that an institution which at least acknowledges God will be more effective in bringing God in on the process, whatever the process might be.

Unfortunately, belief in God is not the only motivation. There is a political side to the push for faith based partnerships that is cynical and purely secular in nature. The political motivation comes from the belief that government should not be involved in social work at all.

In a *Newsday* column in November, Dalton Conley, director of the Center for Advanced Social Science Research at New York University, described President Bush's economic agenda as "radical." With efforts to reduce the number of welfare recipients with stiffer requirements, and with efforts to push Medicare and Social Security into the private sector, President Bush's "domestic agenda marks the complete undoing of the New Deal."

The New Deal refers, of course, to the government programs initiated by Franklin Roosevelt at the height of the Great Depression. These programs represented federal action of unprecedented scope to stimulate industrial recovery, assist victims of the Depression, guarantee minimum living standards and prevent

future economic crises. The massive government intervention initiated by Roosevelt created a social safety net designed to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

It is also worth noting that prior to the institution of the New Deal's social safety net, about the only social services available were provided by faith based and humanitarian charitable groups. All of us have seen dramatic images of Depression era men and women standing in long soup lines outside Christian rescue missions. What those faith groups found out then is still true now: the needs of the needy are far too complicated for mere charity.

A partnership between faith and government is a good idea, but not if the government intends to eventually become a silent partner. A better model for church and state is the one offered in the Bible. The faith community serves as a prophetic voice that bears witness to the needs of the needy and calls on the wider community to "love kindness and do justice." The wider community commits common resources that ensure that the hungry have bread and that the widow and orphan have shelter.

Of course Jesus said that we do not live by bread alone—and that is true. There is a spiritual component—a Bread of Life- that only faith can provide. But without actual bread the groans of human misery drown out even the good news of this ultimate Bread. The tricky part for us is trying to figure out which institution should be distributing which bread.

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