

Coming up: A Spectacular Internecine Brawl

Autor tekstu: **Charles M. Jaquette**

Anti-religionists should be rejoicing coast to coast over President Bush's Executive Order of December 12, 2002 activating his faith-based initiative for government aid to religious charities.

Yes, the order trashes our venerable Constitutional separation of church and state, but there is good reason to believe that it will even more seriously damage the very religions that it purports to help. Here's why.

The initiative promises that no longer will charities be turned down for aid simply on the basis of religion alone. Each church charity will be on the same footing as other private charities in applying for government money. The playing field, said the President, will be level for all applicants, religious or otherwise.

Groups must qualify to receive money. There will be a handbook written in "plain English," the President said, with guidelines and regional seminars to explain the plain English and show groups how to qualify. Some groups must necessarily be skipped over.

These guidelines have not been widely publicized, but we can make reasonable guesses as to what they must contain. For example, in light of the President's recent unequivocal positioning on the issue of segregation in the Trent Lott case (not consistent with the spirit of the country), would we be safe in saying that any church which practices discrimination need not apply?

That would narrow the field somewhat. Then there might be some religious groups that are a bit edgy for our new official moral arbiters. The NAC, or Native American Church, which employs the hallucinogen peyote in its worship, would probably be passed over as would the petitioners from the Rastafarian congregations, which use marijuana in their rituals.

Also not making the cut might be groups with names like „The Satanic Sacrificial Brotherhood" or „Jihad Now!" How about the old-hate mill of the skinhead militia, The World Church of the Creator? No point in buying bullets for those chaps when you might have to eat them for lunch down the road at a compound shoot-out. Give them a „Disapproved."

Dare we to expect Bush and Ashcroft to recant on moral positions they've already actively pushed from their public offices? If not, don't waste paper in applying if your church tolerates or supports pro-choice, stem cell research, sex education, assisted suicide, or stewardship issues like saving old growth forests from lumber companies or the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from drillers.

Politics and religion. Sometimes it's hard to tell what religion is all about, but not so with politics. Votes. Politics is about votes. In case of a squeeze, who will get the bucks for charity? Pablo Flores, part time pastor of the Iglesia Pentacostal on a dirt street at the edge of town or Pat Robertson's tank of PhD's and lawyers?

If you chose Robertson, you're right on target because the ACLU reports in its March 2003 newsletter that one of Robertson's front organizations called Operation Blessing International is already receiving funds from the White House.

Thus we find out, to paraphrase the pigs of Animal Farm, all playing fields will be level, but some will be more level than others. It probably wouldn't hurt your church's chances if it happens to be of the Born-Again, End-Times, Fundamentalist stamp, similar to that of Bush and Ashcroft.

Now the world knows the reputation of religion for its bloody pit fights between this sect and that sect, between East and West, between liberal and conservative.

Names like "Anti-Christ, false prophet, Devil's spawn, apostate, infidel," and worse fly like dead leaves in the winter wind. Holy wars are among the most acrimonious and nasty on record.

Additional in-fighting in the scrap for government largesse will only add to the rancor. So if you enjoy really down-and-dirty, eye-gouging church fights, then you're in for a treat in the coming years as sacred groups square off for their slice of the pie as a result of this ill-considered Executive Order.

Ironically, some perceptive religious thinkers realize that rigorous separation of church

and state is religion's best friend for a couple of reasons:

1. All religions get exactly the same break from the government. No favors are asked and none are given because there are none to give.

2. Under our Constitution U.S. clerics can boast one of the highest rates of godliness among the Western democracies. Around 85% of Americans claim to believe in the Almighty.

3. Lack of separation opens the door for all kinds of wacko theologies to surface and claim their day in court for a cut of the swag, plus free TV time in front of the cameras. These will do nothing to improve the already besmirched image of religion as a worthwhile activity.

In sum, by signing this faith based blunder thus trumping all opposition, young George W., with his proclivity for destructive behavior, continues to dismantle the Constitution while at the same time, laying solid groundwork for a spectacular internecine brawl which should keep lawyers and heaven-bound defenders of all kinds of faiths hustling from now until kingdom come.

Charles M. Jaquette, a "separation junkie," is a retired high school teacher from Arizona.

Published in the 2003 August/July issue of the American Rationalist ©.

(Publikacja: 30-07-2003 Ostatnia zmiana: 06-09-2003)

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