

Let me hear you say “Amen!”

During the last week of January, President Bush startled the nation by announcing the creation of the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (WHOOFBACI). The office will be headed by renowned University of Pennsylvania Political Science Professor John J. DiIulio Jr., and will work to distribute funds to religious and community organizations engaged in charitable works. Despite its laudable purpose – and the feel-good photo-op it generated, with President Bush surrounded by ministers, rabbis, and imams – WHOOFBACI (pronounced “woof-bah-key”) throws into stark relief the question of how we interpret one of our most closely held tenets, the separation of church and state.

“Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government purposes are beneficent,” Justice Louis Brandeis warned in his dissenting opinion in *Olmstead v. United States* in 1928, “[for] the greatest dangers to liberty lurk in the insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning, but without understanding.” I have no doubt that this program has been conceived of by well-meaning individuals. While I tend to disagree with Bush on many policy issues, I honestly believe that he wants to do what he feels is right for the citizens of the United States. Is this, however, the financial support of “faith-based” and “community” organizations, the best way to help those citizens while still protecting our cherished liberties? WHOOFBACI presents us with a great dilemma: on the one hand, we finally have a clear way to improve drastically the quality and reach of numerous charitable programs that have been minimized due to their lack of funding, while on the other we are faced with the possibility that this program will lead to a general erosion of the power of the establishment clause. What are we to think?

The benefits of this new program are obvious, while the dangers are less so. The problem with WHOOFBACI, explain opponents of the proposal, is that it cannot possibly fulfill its mission without discriminating in favor of one religion over another. Once the government has even hinted that it might favor, say, Christianity, over the Church of Satan, it will be violating the establishment clause. In addition, opponents explain, the government will be responsible for funding programs that avowedly discriminate in hiring practices. It is entirely legal for a religious organization to refuse to hire, or indeed to fire, an individual for not holding particular religious or moral beliefs. Finally, opponents add, the organizations that will be funded often work openly or surreptitiously to pressure individuals to change their religious beliefs, and they would be able to use their new funding to assist in so proselytizing. Even the people in charge of the new program see the problems: “Government should never fund religion,” agrees Stephen Goldsmith, the former mayor of Indianapolis and a Bush advisor on faith-based organizations. “It can fund the soup, it can fund the shelter, it shouldn’t fund the bibles.” The problem is that money is fungible, and the math is simple: if you increase the funding of a group that has until now been splitting its available resources between proselytizing and charitable works, you increase the available funding to both sorts of activities.

Even if we accept the use of our tax dollars to fund organizations that will use their new resources to intensify their religious action, I think we have to consider another, far more serious danger. Any organization that is engaged in charitable works can apply to this office for funding to assist in all of its programs. What about the organizations that shouldn’t have that funding? What about groups that spread messages of hate and intolerance? What do we do when the Nation of Islam, whose leader has referred to Jews as “the synagogue of Satan,” asks for funding for programs to educate inner-city youth? What happens when the Ku Klux Klan applies for a

grant to set up a food kitchen, or the American Nazi Party asks for money to help it establish a voluntary sterilization clinic for the poor? Do we hand over our tax dollars then?

This problem is even more complicated than at first it might seem. If, for instance, this program wisely refuses to fund organizations that preach hate, do we want our government deciding what “hate” actually is? Is the declaration that a woman has a right to an abortion – a declaration that might result in what some would see as the murder of an innocent child – an act of hate or an act of free speech? Is the denial of the divinity of Jesus, which some say might result in an individual burning in hell for eternity, an act of hate or an act of religious freedom? Is the Southern Baptists’ contention that homosexuality is a perversion and must be cured an expression of hate, or is it instead a simple expression of an opinion protected by the first amendment? Do we really want George W. Bush and his aides judging our morals and values? Is that why he was elected President of the United States?

Thus far I have asked many questions and answered few, primarily because I think that every American must independently consider this office and its implications. Personally, I feel that despite our many reservations and very real fears, we should support our president and his cabinet as they seek to heal the wounds of our country and reduce the suffering of our fellow citizens through this new White House office. At the same time, however, we must not abandon nor ignore our reservations and fears completely, for they are based on solid foundations. The only answer is that we must give the president some leeway while maintaining a close, almost paranoid watch to ensure that our freedoms, and the freedoms of our fellow Americans, are not swept away by misplaced governmental benevolence. President Bush might be right, and for that matter is *probably* right, that WHOOFBACI will not usher in a new age of governmental

intrusion into religion – but, my God, what if he’s wrong? “Eternal vigilance is the price of Liberty,” John Philpot Curran warned in 1790; I know that I, for one, will be watching.