

BRIEF ANALYSIS

No. 372

For immediate release:

Monday, September 17, 2001

Right Idea, Wrong Method

By Fr. Robert A. Sirico

President Bush's attempt to draw attention to the social contribution of religious charities represents the best spirit of progressive conservatism. It is an attempt to move away from failed government programs of the past and push toward expanding private and often religious programs that have consistently worked to integrate the poor into productive economic life.

The trouble is that the legislative agenda of "Charitable Choice," as it came to be conceived, did not go far enough. Instead of emphasizing the role of private support and religious motivation in charity, it proposed that religiously oriented private charities receive direct financial support from the public purse. This aspect of the program has stymied support among the charitable sector and so far hindered legislative progress.

Changing Approaches to Charity. It is useful to see Bush's initiative as part of a larger trend. In the last century, by way of background, four distinct waves characterized the provision of charitable services to the poor and needy.

The first wave, from the turn of the century to the Great Depression, pushed for the professionalization of charitable services and a move away from religiously based organizations as exclusive providers. The political culture of Progressivism hoped for enlightened leaders, motivated by civic duty, to carry out the task rather than depending on religious motivation.

The second wave began with the New Deal and its work programs, and represented something of a repudiation of the first wave. Clearly, professionalization of welfare could not deal with systematic macroeconomic failure. Government programs, designed and implemented with large economic goals, were to take up the slack.

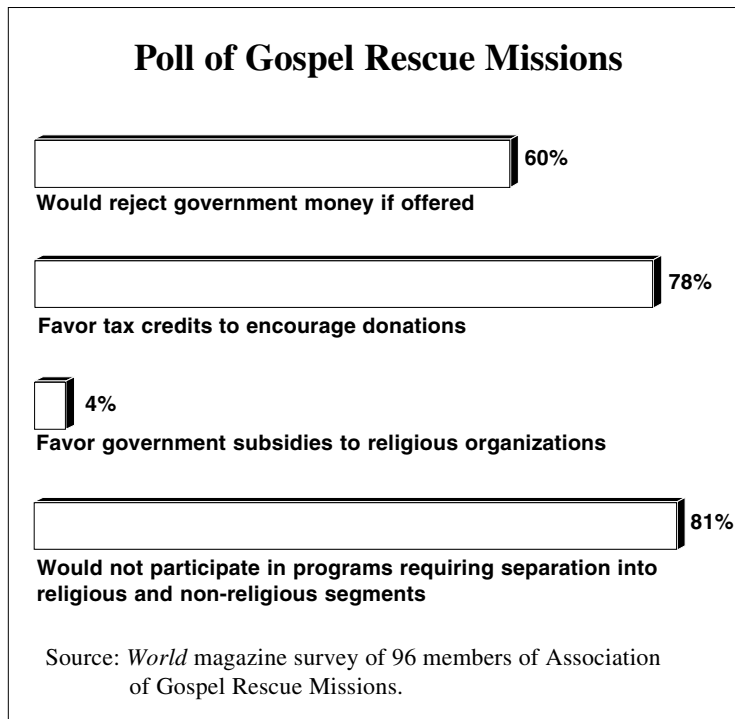
The third wave came with the Great Society, which can be seen as a radicalization of the New Deal. No longer designed for mere income support or economic stabilization, welfare programs of the 1960s were established based on egalitarian and redistributionist goals. The "haves" were to give to the "have nots" based not only on need but also on the principle of justice and equality.

The New Approach.

By the 1980s, it was clear that all three waves had failed to fundamentally address the real-world concerns of the poor and needy. Income support and material provision generally are important elements, but they are not all that is necessary. The necessary human element of caring and

concern, tailored to individual circumstances, cannot be replicated by welfare bureaucracies. Moreover, the religious motivation inspires a level of self-sacrifice (from donors and workers) in the carrying out of charitable responsibilities.

The decade of the 1990s saw the emergence of a fourth wave: an explosion in numbers and scale of religiously minded charitable efforts. Thousands of organizations took on the burden of providing material and moral support for the poor. Changing the values that



BRIEF ANALYSIS

No. 372

Page 2

had doomed generations of low-income people to poverty and crime became one of their goals.

Alongside this, an intellectual movement took root and grew up around the idea that private charity is a viable and even superior alternative to public charity and government programs. The new emphasis was on genuine compassion, which requires direct individual intervention, rather than on redistribution or social justice.

In speeches during the 2000 campaign, both presidential candidates emphasized the contribution of religious charity to alleviating suffering, but it was George W. Bush who took up the theme most vigorously. After he was elected, he proposed a series of measures to bolster religious charity. Some of these measures relied on incentives for private support. But his proposal also called for public funding for private charity.

Objections to Government Funding. That last point raised the hackles of those intent on preserving the separation of church and state. Why, they asked, should taxpayers be asked to fund groups that seek to convert the poor to a particular faith? At the same time, religious groups themselves began to raise questions about the wisdom of receiving government money and obeying the strictures that are necessarily attached to it.

Among the caricatures offered by opponents was that of religious charities looking for handouts from the government — which would indeed represent hypocrisy. But a survey commissioned by *World* magazine showed this was not the case. As the figure shows, of 96 members of the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions:

- Three out of five organizations would reject government money even if offered.
- While 78 percent favored tax credits to encourage more private donations, only 4 percent said they would favor government subsidies to religious organizations.
- If legislation requires that private organizations segment their programs into religious and non-religious, 81 percent said they would refuse to participate.

Among the reasons is that government money changes the fundraising focus of the organization and restricts the

kind of service that a religious group can provide. No organization should be willing to obey strictures that government routinely attaches to its money. As sociologist Peter Berger of Boston University warns, “He who dines with the devil had better have a long spoon.”

Preserving Religious Independence. It is not enough to say, as President Bush did, that “government should never fund the teaching of faith, but it should support the good works of the faithful.” In providing charitable services, faith and works are bound up with each other. It is not always easy to separate “proselytization” from “service,” since faith is the very *raison d’être* of many of these organizations. It is contrary to the nature of religious charity to draw a stark line between faith and works.

For many years, religious organizations have worked to enact into law severe restrictions on the state in its dealings with religious institutions. Nine states have enacted religious protection measures, and courts in six other states have issued rulings that effect the same result. Many other states have long-standing traditions of permitting religious schools and charities as much freedom in their operation as possible. This is a result of intense resistance on the part of religious organizations themselves, whose independence even in an era of statism is notable. Nothing should be done that would endanger this independence.

Whether or not some version of Charitable Choice ultimately becomes law, nothing is going to stop this fourth wave of private religious charity. The Bush administration deserves praise for having opened the debate that has given recognition to private religious charity. The policy proposals offered in the future need to distinguish more carefully between the much-needed freedom to support and work for these organizations and the dangers of actually having these organizations receive support from the taxpayer.

Fr. Robert A. Sirico is president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Note: Nothing written here should be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the National Center for Policy Analysis or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

The NCPA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit public policy organization. We depend entirely on the financial support of individuals, corporations and foundations that believe in private sector solutions to public policy problems. You can contribute to our effort by mailing your donation to our Dallas headquarters or logging on to our website at www.ncpa.org and clicking “An Invitation to Support Us.”