

## CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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# We're All "Faith-Based" Now

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The lingo is starting to catch on. There are now "faith-based organizations," "faith-based methodologies," and even an "Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives" in the White House. It's enough to make good old-fashioned atheists, agnostics, and assorted pagans feel a bit left out. Or maybe not.

Though not typically known for running effective social service programs, leaders of American Atheists, Inc. recently suggested to their members that maybe they, too, could run "faith-based" programs to help the poor. They're right. Nothing stops them.

Charitable Choice (that part of the President's initiative which has been law for almost five years now) is not a new government program to direct money just to "religious" groups, and away from "non-religious" or "secular" groups. Opponents of equal access for faith-based groups have spread this myth far and wide. Charitable Choice simply says that when government partners with community groups, no group is off-limits because of its religious character. It overturns old rules that unfairly made some groups ineligible. Officials must now evaluate all programs, "religious" and "secular," based on how well they train the unemployed, care for children, or heal drug addicts, and not on whether they can agree to make their program "secular enough" to work with government.

Under the President's initiative, neither atheists nor Christians, neither Jews nor Muslims, nor any other group, can be excluded up front because of their particular religious beliefs. Those who find it odd at best that atheists are eligible to run their own "faith-based" social service programs may be missing the most radical point of all of this new initiative: we are all "faith-based" now.

How is this possible? Charitable Choice radically rejects any form of government bias that would favor either "secular" or "faith-based" programs. This is the true neutrality required by the Constitution. In the past, some faith-based groups were unfairly regarded as "pervasively sectarian" or too religious to work with government. Now the idea is a level playing field for all. Charitable Choice requires government to be blind to whether a program is "religious" or "secular." Government does not belong in the business of making these religious judgments. The record shows that religious tests like that result in discrimination and bad public policy. Plus, the distinction is built on sand.

Even "secular" programs have fundamental convictions based on faith. American Atheists, Inc. admits that their programs for the poor would be based on their beliefs in human potential and "the principles of reason." Christian programs, such as Teen Challenge, simply put their faith in different principles. "Faith-based" and "secular" programs often have more in common than their proponents will admit. Across the country, both types of organizations offer drug treatment, provide child care, and hire their staff based on their own strong beliefs and convictions about how people should live and the best way to help the people they are serving.

At bottom, then, any program government funds is just as "religious" as another, whether or not its advocates claim to believe in a transcendent God. When we recognize that all people—even atheists—are people of faith, then we can really make good on the Constitution's promise of religious liberty for all. People or programs motivated by "secular" convictions deserve no greater place or privilege in public life than do people or programs motivated by faith in God. Once our public policies fully recognize this, the "faith-based" revolution will have succeeded and the term won't be needed anymore.

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