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Faith-Based Charities: Which Faiths Allowed?
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President Bush has created a White House office of "faith-based charities" to permit religious organizations to apply for government funding for their programs to support the poor. This has brought about a new era of possible cooperation between religions and government in the United States. The president's initiative would enable religious institutions -- such as churches, synagogues, and mosques -- that sponsor programs to help the needy, to be eligible for government funding for those projects. Programs such as soup kitchens, health clinics and adult literacy classes could obtain federal funds whether they are supported by secular or religious groups.

On the surface this is a wonderful idea, having government support to allow such programs to continue providing services to the needy. However, the idea of religions taking money from the government, for whatever purpose, raises many ethical, religious, legal and political issues. If the president successfully enacts this program, then it will surely provide fodder for many future columns.

Today let's examine only one question, namely, which religions will be eligible to receive money? The very first phrase of the Bill of Rights states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." The courts have interpreted this to mean that the U.S. government cannot favor one religion over another, i.e., by "establishing" one as better than another. To my layman's eye, this means religions could receive money for their charitable work providing that the government treats all of them equally and does not favor one religion over another.

The president has already made clear that the program will not be limited to a few branches of Christianity or even to Christianity alone. Mr. Bush regularly uses the phrase "churches, synagogues and mosques" as organizations whose charitable activities are eligible for his program. The three major Western religions are thus included, but what about other religions? Will non-Western religions, such as those that were unknown to the founders of the Western religions, be allowed into the program? Will Buddhist temples or meditation organizations be permitted? This is an important question for western states, for although there are few Buddhists in Wyoming, significant populations of them can be found in both Colorado and Utah, as well as along the West Coast. How about Native American religious organizations, to bring matters even closer to home? Will the government

treat these religions without disfavoring them in comparison to Western religions?

Another category is religions with the same names as ones condemned by Scripture in antiquity, such as Paganism and Wicca, whose practitioners are colloquially known as witches. Will soup kitchens or medical centers run by these groups be eligible for government funding? This is more than a rhetorical question. In Wyoming, unofficial sources indicate that more citizens claim to be Pagan or Wiccan than claim to be Jewish. Furthermore, at least one charity organization operates under their auspices in Wyoming. Will the government be able to work with these groups in its faith-based charity program despite predictable pressure from some Christian groups arguing they are illegitimate?

Finally, what about religions with strong political enemies? Take Falun Gong, for instance, a meditation society based on Buddhism with millions of adherents in Mainland China. The Chinese government has declared it an "evil cult" and has begun an extensive campaign of persecution, including arrest, rape, torture and execution. What if Falun Gong adherents in the United States applied for government funds for their charity operations in New York City and the Chinese government opposed it? Would the U.S. government be able to evaluate Falun Gong's application fairly?

However well intentioned, President Bush's "faith-based charities" initiative will face a number of challenges. Our forefathers placed the separation of church and state at the beginning of the Bill of Rights to indicate the pitfalls of having the government make decisions about religions. The president's program may be able to meet the legal requirements of constitutional law, but it will be able to do so only by seeing and carefully negotiating those pitfalls.