



Obama's Faith-based Initiatives

Obama seemed to take pains to distinguish his effort from Bush's, noting that secular groups would also be covered under the office. "The goal of this office will not be to favor one religious group over another — or even religious groups over secular groups.... It will simply be to work on behalf of those organizations that want to work on behalf of our communities, and to do so without blurring the line that our founders wisely drew between church and state."



The president named Joshua DuBois, who has been dubbed Obama's "pastor in chief," to lead the office. DuBois, who is only 26 years old, [agrees](#) that the Founding Fathers drew a line between church and state. Like Obama, he does not agree that the administration's faith-based initiatives will blur or cross this line. "Some folks on the left are uncomfortable with [religious] topics. There is a constitutional and clear separation between church and state embedded in the fabric of our country. And some folks think that means we have to be separate not only in our legal approach to policy but also who we talk to, who we engage with, whose concerns we can listen to."

Among the "folks on the left" who reacted with disappointment to the president's executive order, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was one of the most critical. Caroline Fredrickson, director of the [ACLU Washington Legislative Office](#), complained:

What we are seeing today is significant — a president giving his favored clergy a governmental stamp of approval. There is no historical precedent for presidential meddling in religion — or religious leaders meddling in federal policy — through a formal government advisory committee made up mostly of the president's chosen religious leaders.

The ACLU, like the Obama administration, also believes that (in DuBois' words) "there is a constitutional and clear separation between church and state," yet they come to different conclusions regarding whether providing government assistance to religious organizations would violate this principle. Despite their contrary conclusions, both are wrong in that a strict separation of church and state was never part of the Constitution nor was it intended to be (again in DuBois' words) "embedded



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in the fabric of our country."

The phrase "separation of church and state" does not appear in the Constitution. What does appear there is the First Amendment's "Establishment" clause ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion"), followed immediately by the "Free Exercise" clause ("or prohibiting the exercise thereof").

According to constitutional scholar Kevin R.C. Gutzman, in his book [The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Constitution](#): "The purpose of the Free Exercise Clause was to keep the federal government from interfering in religious matters (and laws) in the states." Likewise, Gutzman explains, the Establishment Clause was twisted by Justice Hugo Black, who had close ties with the Klu Klux Klan, in order to deny government support for parochial schools, which were mostly Catholic at the time. "Black claimed that not only did the First Amendment Establishment Clause apply to the states and local governments (which it decidedly did not, in its original understanding, as some states at the time of the ratification had established state churches), *but it also erected, in language not found in the Constitution, 'a wall of separation between church and state.'*" (Emphasis added.)

Simply put, the often repeated notions of a strict separation between church and state are post-constitutional additions to justify more and more encroachments by the secular, centralizing federal government.

But this does not mean that Obama's faith-based initiatives are constitutionally sound. The most obvious constitutional problem with these initiatives, of course, is the fact that the Constitution does not authorize the federal government to provide material welfare regardless if the recipients are secular or religious. Beyond that is the fact that the original intent of the First Amendment's Free Exercise clause was to prevent the federal government from unduly influencing private religion. But Obama, the former constitutional law professor, seems intent on taking these new initiatives in that direction.

On the campaign trail, Obama [explained](#) how his faith-based initiatives would differ from his predecessor's. "If you get a federal grant, you can't use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can't discriminate against them — or against the people you hire — on the basis of their religion." Based on this statement, Obama plans to use his new initiatives to dictate the terms of how churches should handle their matters in an effort to make participating organizations more "politically correct" and secular.

Attorney [David Dietman](#) explains the inherent dangers in private churches taking the strings-attached federal funding: "It is a deal with the Devil, namely, the Federal government — a massive, omnipotent tool of social engineering in the hands of the Left. If adopted, 'faith-based' initiatives will open the door to the federally mandated destruction of one of the few areas of civil society that works, namely, the private religious and charitable arena."

Not all religious organizations are eager to participate in Obama's faith-based program. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refused to participate in Bush's initiative and will also forego any federal funds this time around. The [Salt Lake Tribune](#) reported:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has operated an "effective welfare and humanitarian program for more than 60 years without government funding," spokesman Scott Trotter said Wednesday [February 4], signaling the church also is unlikely ever to accept federal money under Obama's initiatives.



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Obama's faith-based initiatives are not mandatory at this time and churches that still cherish constitutional liberties have the option to opt out, but the laws of economics aren't in their favor. Private charities have never recovered from the effect the modern welfare state has had in crowding them out. Will America witness a similar decline in churches that refuse federal funds and direction?



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