



The changing face of American compassion: ethnicity, religion, and worldview conflicts

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Abstract

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When Barack Obama announced his support for “Faith Based Initiatives” in August 2008 many people were shocked. Others saw it as a political ploy because they regarded the policy as one of the Bush Administration’s more unpopular programmes. In fact, the idea of “Faith Based Initiatives” was first proposed during the Clinton Presidency with support from such liberals as Senator Joe Lieberman. In this article popular misunderstandings of the role of religion in the USA will be discussed to show that the issue is far more complex than the media and a host of critical authors want us to believe and that the attack on “Faith Based Initiatives” has far-reaching implications for the relationship between Christianity and politics in both America and the rest of the world. It also raises issues about ethnicity, religion and the conflict of worldviews.

Opsomming

Die veranderende gelaat van Amerikaanse barmhartigheid: etnisiteit, godsdiens en wêreldbeskoulike konflik

Die aankondiging van steun aan “Geloofsgebaseerde Inisiatiewe” deur Barack Obama het talle mense geskok. Ander mense weer het dit gesien as ’n politieke set, omdat hierdie program en beleid juis een van die Bush-administrasie se meer onpopulêre programme was. Die idee van “Geloofsgebaseerde Inisiatiewe” is eerste deur die Clinton-presidensie voorgestel met on-

dersteuning van liberale politici soos senator Joe Liebermann. In hierdie artikel word die populêre wanopvatting oor die rol van godsdiens in die VSA bespreek ten einde aan te toon dat hierdie aangeleentheid veel meer kompleks is as wat die media en 'n groot aantal outeurs voorgee dat dit is. Die aanval op die "Geloofsgebaseerde Inisiatiewe" het verreikende implikasies vir die verhouding tussen Christendom en die politiek, sowel in die VSA as in die res van die wêreld. Dit stel ook vraagstukke aangaande etnisiteit, godsdiens en die konflik van wêreldbeskouings aan die orde.

1. The American Faith Based Initiatives Program and its critics

The establishment, by executive order, of the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives by President George W. Bush on 29 January 2001 created a storm of protest in the United States of America. To most outsiders, people living in Africa, Asia, Europe, or other parts of the Americas, providing Government support in terms of funds raised from Federal, State, and Local Government taxes, to charities that perform a clear public service seems reasonable enough. For example all levels of government in places like Canada and South Africa provide funding to non-profit groups many of which are explicitly religious. Yet to an increasingly vocal group of Americans this practice is a threat to democracy that has to be stopped (Hedges, 2006:13; Goldberg, 2006:107-108; and McDonald, 2010: 11).

If the arguments about the Faith Based Initiatives program were restricted to an internal American debate they could easily be ignored by people living in other parts of the world. But, in our increasingly interconnected world where English is effectively a global language, what happens in America often has an impact elsewhere. For example recently the Canadian author Marci McDonald used American debates about the role of religion in public life to claim that a group of fundamentalist Christians have gained undue influence over the Canadian Government (McDonald, 2010: 349-361). Similarly, a growing sensitivity to, and criticism of christian involvement in public affairs can be observed in Britain and Germany (Anon., 2010; Nazir-Al, 2010; Idea.de, 2007; 2008).

Although the introduction of the Faith Based Initiatives program provided the occasion for a sustained attack on christian involvement in social and political life, these attacks actually began long before the start of the program. In the early 1980s Canadian jour-

nalist Judith Haiven wrote about the “dangers” of a host of christian non-profit organisations (Haiven, 1984:63-72; 110-124). Later, American journalist Sara Diamond developed the same themes in a series of books that attacked the entry of Christians into debates about public policy (Diamond, 1989; 1995; 1996; 1998). A host of other writers then followed her lead including Chris Hedges, whose *American fascists: the christian right and the war on America* (Hedges, 2006) became a long running best-seller, and Michelle Goldberg who devoted an entire section of her *Kingdom coming: the rise of christian nationalism* to Faith Based Initiatives (Goldberg, 2006:106-133).

Although apparently written by independent authors, each of which claims to have identified a trend that others have overlooked, these works actually feed on each other and in doing so seriously misrepresent American politics and social life. The ideas found in these works are widely propagated by groups like the Freedom From Religion Foundation (2010), and the so-called New Atheists – a group of vocal critics of religion that includes such people as journalist Christopher Hitchens, Oxford Professor Richard Dawkins, and the American philosopher Sam Harris. The clearly stated aim of these people is to relegate the practice of religion, if it continues to exist at all, to the purely private realm (McGrath & McGrath, 2010).

The following examination of the Faith Based Initiatives program demonstrates the way this anti-christian lobby propagates false claims to discredit Christianity. It also shows that contrary to what the critics claim Faith Based Initiatives represent a well thought out approach to social welfare that has proved highly successful.

2. The pentecostal origins of Faith Based Initiatives

According to both supporters and critics of Faith Based Initiatives the idea originated from an attempt to close down a drug and alcohol abuse program run by an American christian organisation known as Teen Challenge (NGLTF, 2003; Olasky, 1995; Teen Challenge, 2011). Founded in the 1960s by a charismatic pentecostal preacher David Wilkerson, in New York City the organisation gained national attention among evangelical christian groups through Wilkerson’s best-selling autobiographical book, *The cross and the switchblade* (Wilkerson, 1963). From then on it slowly spread throughout the United States to several other countries including Britain and South Africa. Essentially, Teen Challenge helped young teens, particularly ex-gang members, get off drugs and rebuild their lives by emphasising the importance of a christian

conversion experience and ongoing involvement in a church community.

As a christian evangelistic organisation Teen Challenge looked to churches and individual Christians for support. In addition to employing its own staff the organisation established various treatment centres, half-way houses and homes. All appears to have gone fairly well until the 1990s when “the state licensing authorities” in several states, including Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Texas began to demand that the organisation meet State licensing criteria. These demands came to a head in San Antonio, Texas, in 1995. Even though the organisation received no government funding, “the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse nevertheless subjected” it to “arbitrary licensing and credentialing procedures”, insisting that “Counseling that emphasizes religious belief is not real treatment”. Therefore the Commission attempted to close down the Teen Challenge operation (Olasky, 1995; 1996:127).

This intervention in the work of an established welfare program provoked an angry protest on Pat Robertson’s *700 Club*. Robertson, the son of an American Senator, is one of the leading television evangelists in America. He ran as a presidential candidate in America in 1988. Robertson is the founder of Regent University and the Christian Broadcasting Network which is arguably the most successful christian media organisation in America. The *700 Club* is his flagship program. It has aired since 1966 and attracts an average daily audience of around one million viewers (Harrell, 1987).

This protest led to the intervention of the then Texas Governor, George W. Bush, who was to become the 43rd American President in 2001 (NGLTF, 2003). Eventually, after considerable effort, and with the support of several academic studies that appeared to show that whatever its faults the Teen Challenge Alcohol and Drug program worked better than most secular programs, the organisation was allowed to continue with its work (Olasky, 1995). How valid these “scientific studies” actually were is still hotly disputed. Researchers at both the Pew Foundation and Lilly Endowment strongly support them while members of American atheist organisations questioned their validity (Pew, 2009; NCCED, s.a.; Anon., 2001a).

3. The growth of Faith Based Initiatives

Although it is widely believed that Faith Based Initiatives were the brainchild of the Bush administration, the first American Faith Based

Initiative Bill was actually signed into law by Democratic President Bill Clinton. At the time it was known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 where Section 104 outlined the principles of a faith based approach (USA, 1996).

It is important to recognise that the original bill was sponsored by right-wing Republican Senator John Ashcroft with broad based support among both Republicans and Democrats (Anon., s.a.a). Later, Ashcroft, who is a committed pentecostal Christian and former christian college President, was chosen by Bush to become his Attorney General. He held this post from 2001 until his resignation in 2005.

On the Faith Based Initiatives legislation, Ashcroft, who is a very conservative politician, worked closely with liberal left Democrats like Lieberman and Harris Wofford who were among the bill's strongest supporters. Lieberman, an observant Jew who refuses to campaign on the Sabbath, is known for his independent views (Anon., s.a.b). Wofford, on the other hand, was a former special assistant to President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) on civil rights with an impeccable record as a spokesperson for the downtrodden (Anon., s.a.c; Wofford, 1980).

All of these men, and many other members of the American Government, supported the Faith Based Initiatives program because they agreed that the welfare system was broken and in need of radical change. Indeed, Lieberman and others like him consistently supported Faith Based programs to the annoyance of atheist and similar groups (Anon., 2001b; 2002).

Importantly the 1996 Federal Faith Based Initiative legislation expired after five years. Therefore President Bush had to reintroduce its provisions in his own Bill which is why the idea became attached to him. Additionally, Bush created an office of Faith Based Initiatives thus increasing the provision's profile. Previously it was known as the "charitable choice" program. Nevertheless the provisions were the same as the 1996 bill.

The argument used by supporters of Faith Based programs is, in the words of *Time Magazine*, that America has "a failed welfare system" unable to take care of "more than 35 million Americans" who "continue to live below the poverty line" (Anon., 1997). In this situation various levels of government have increasingly looked for programs that work and have found them among religious groups.

As *Time* said,

... a little-noticed provision in last year's [i.e. 1997] welfare-reform law called 'charitable choice' has opened the door for the nation's 260,000 religious congregations to take a far greater role in welfare programs: they can now solicit government funds directly rather than set up charitable subsidiaries.

The report also observed it was not just atheists who disliked the new rules, "some of the strongest opposition to the new programs comes from religious leaders" including southern Baptists in Texas (Anon., 1997).

Contrary to the impression created on television and in the media outside of the USA, these religious groups are not simply fundamentalist Christians. Led by respected politicians like Liebermann many Jewish groups support Faith Based programs. So too do Muslim and other minority religious groups who claim that because they are rooted in local communities they are best able to deliver appropriate aid to the needy in ways that will help them escape the poverty trap.

The brains behind the Bush campaign to renew America through a "new 'character crusade'" is said to be a Jewish professor of Journalism turned fundamentalist Christian, Marvin Olasky (2010). In fact, it was his books *The tragedy of American compassion* (1992) and *Renewing American compassion* (1996) that are credited with creating the idea of Faith Based Initiatives in the first place.

Surprisingly, even the strongly critical *American atheist* magazine admits that such ideas and programs have "appeal to both liberals and conservatives" and have remarkably broad based support. Even Tipper Gore, the wife of former Presidential Candidate and Bush opponent, Al Gore, is reported to be a strong supporter of this faith based "new communalism" which is also described as a "civil society" movement (Anon., 2001b; Abernethy, 2003).

Opposing Faith Based Initiatives are an array of groups that believe in the strictest possible interpretation of the First Amendment to the American Constitution. These include the American atheist organisation which has published various attacks on the plan in its magazine, *The American atheist*, issued the position papers cited elsewhere in this article. The American Civil Liberties Union has also issued several position papers attacking Faith Based Initiatives (Anon., 2004). Finally, there are numerous anti-Bush websites like

The Whitehouse, not to be confused with the official *The White House* website, that ridicule the idea of Faith Base Initiatives.

4. The American debate about the separation of church and state

To appreciate what all of this means in the American context, it is important to know something about American ideas about the separation of church and state which is enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. When the British ruled what became the United States of America, various churches were recognised as the established church for particular states. Thus in Maryland the Roman Catholics had special rights while in Rhode Island it was the Congregationalists who were privileged. These rights extended to both state support from taxes and the ability to prevent other denominations building churches in a given area.

When the founding fathers of the United States of America drew up their Constitution in 1787 the role of religion was not defined in the Constitution itself. Consequently what became known as the First Amendment was introduced in 1789. This amendment states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion ...”, which is known as the “Establishment Clause”. Then follows the statement “or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” which is known as the “Free Exercise Clause” (Carter, 1994:106).

These two clauses frame American thinking about the relationship between church and state. Today there are two major approaches to interpreting the First Amendment. One group of scholars argue that the intent of the First Amendment was to prevent any one church dominating a particular state and that the founding fathers never intended to remove all religion from public life. Another group argues that while the original intent may have been restricted to preventing the establishment of any one church we now ought to recognise that what is implied in the Amendment is a complete separation of religion from secular life.

Surprisingly the people who hold to these very different positions cannot be identified along religious lines. For example the American atheist’s organisation acknowledged that some Baptists also support the complete separation of religion from the state (Anon., 1999a) and the organisation, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, is supported by many church groups particularly Baptist groups (Anon., 1999b). Here it is worth noting that former American

President Bush had a Methodist/Presbyterian background while his predecessor, Bill Clinton, was a Baptist.

Generally the earlier interpretation that the First Amendment simply prevented the creation of an established church held sway until shortly after World War II. Then, with the founding of groups like Americans United for the Separation of Church and State in 1947, the newer interpretation began to gain acceptance.

5. The Lemon test

Eventually, after a long political and social debate, ideas about the separation of church and state were stabilised by what is known as “the Lemon test”. Since legal decisions are constantly being challenged and reinterpreted all that we can do here is give an overview of its main points. The “Lemon test” resulted from the Supreme Court’s judgement in the case *Lemon vs. Kurtzman* which dealt with Pennsylvania’s “Nonpublic Elementary and Secondary Education Act” of 1968 and the issue of state aid to religiously based schools. Hearing this case the Court established three principles that such legislation must have for the funding of religiously based charitable groups:

- **“The government’s action must have a legitimate secular purpose”**

This is usually interpreted to mean that charitable work by a religious group can be funded by various levels of government provided the work itself is secular as is the case in providing shelters for the homeless or soup kitchens for the poor.

- **“The government’s action must not have the primary effect of either advancing or inhibiting religion”**

This is more debatable because it appears that the clause may allow a group to promote its beliefs as long as it does not make this its primary goal or something that is funded by government grants. For example this clause appears to allow a Salvation Army officer to talk to someone about their own faith and even suggest that involvement with the Salvation Army might help them recover from an addiction, provided it is done in the context of a drug rehabilitation, shelter, or food program that is the recipient of government aid. On the other hand, some people say that this totally rules out any religious content in the actual delivery of aid. When an employee of a group delivering government funded aid attempts to encourage someone

else to change their lifestyle in a religious direction they have forfeited the right of the group to receive government aid.

- **“The government’s action must not result in an ‘excessive entanglement’ with religion”**

This seems fairly clear but again it is possible to argue over what is meant by “excessive” and what is an “entanglement”. Is the black Muslim social worker who suggests to an alcoholic that alcohol is evil and that by joining a mosque they will remove themselves from the temptation to get drunk, exercising “excessive” religious pressure? And if so, does this entangle the government with religion? (USA, 1971; Boyle, 2004).

The overall effect of the *Lemon vs. Kurtzman* judgement appears to have been that religiously based non-profit groups were able to apply for and obtain funds from all levels of government, provided they were able to show that the funds were strictly used for humanitarian purposes and that the religious charities operated in an essentially secular manner. As a result soup kitchens, drug programs, et cetera received support as long as no attempt was made to introduce religion into their activities in anything but the most casual of way. Therefore, while individuals might have spoken about religion on a person to person basis, the program itself could not include a religious element as an official part of the program.

6. Post-Lemon developments

The compromise reached as a result of the widespread acceptance of the Lemon test seems to have changed in the 1990s as a result of some heavy handed activities by people who attempted to impose stricter restrictions on religious groups than existed previously. One of the cases taken to the Supreme Court is known as *Rosenberger vs. the University of Virginia*. In this case the University of Virginia had decided that it could no longer allow christian student societies to receive funding from funds set aside by the university to support student activities. This decision was justified on the basis of the First Amendment with the result that all religious groups on campus were told that they were no longer eligible for the normal support provided to other student societies.

As a result the Supreme Court heard a case in 1995 brought by one of the christian groups. It decided in favour of the christian students against the university. In this judgement the Supreme Court ruled that “the University of Virginia violated the law” by withholding funds:

“Because the money was offered to all student groups, regardless of creed, the religious group was entitled to the funding.” (Boyle, 2004.)

This judgement was seen as a victory for faith based groups and paved the way for the Welfare Reform Act and Ashcroft Amendment of 1996 that was signed into law by President Clinton. President Bush’s Faith Based Initiatives of 2001 follow very naturally from this act. So too did the “Charity Aid, Recovery and Empowerment (CARE) Act” of 2003 (Moyers, 2003). It also clearly played a role in President Bush’s State of the Union Address on 20 January 2004 where he unveiled numerous faith based initiatives (The White House, January 2004).

More recently, Barack Obama surprised many Americans with an announcement supporting the Faith Based Initiative Program during the 2008 American Presidential Election Campaign. Although critics saw this as a cynical attempt to gain the support of evangelical Christians, others embraced his idea as eminently realistic (Pew, 2008; Fowler, 2008; Loven, 2008; Chozick & Belkin, 2008).

It is important to note that before becoming President, Barack Obama regularly attended Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago (Anon., s.a.d). Although the former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who baptised Obama, was a controversial figure, the church runs numerous social programs all of which benefit from the Faith Based Initiatives approach to welfare. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Obama’s support for Faith Based programs is based on conviction rather than political opportunism (Obama, 2006).

7. The attack on christian involvement in politics

In the rhetoric of the contemporary secularism, Faith Based Initiatives serve as a lightning rod to further their attack on the role of religion in public life. According to numerous high profile writers like Hedges, Diamond, and McDonald, Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, are conspiring to pervert democracy to create theocratic governments throughout the western world.

Essentially these authors claim that christian conspirators, who Diamond calls the “Christian right”, Hedges labels “Christian fascists” and McDonald identifies as “Christian nationalists”, are gaining undue influence over politics and society in western democracies (Hedges, 2006:10-11; Diamond, 1989:130-136; McDonald, 2010: 11). They all agree that this is a new form of fascist nationalism that

can be described as “christian reconstruction,” or “dominionism” (Diamond, 1995:247; Hedges, 2006:12; McDonald, 2010:11).

Without carefully defining their terms, or providing specific citations, they link the type of genuine fear of atomic war illustrated in the German television film *Heimat 3* to christian politics (Reitz, 2004). In doing so they claim that Christians who become involved in politics are driven by the “conviction that the end times foretold in the book of Revelation are at hand” (McDonald, 2010:11). Therefore, we may expect “Christ returning to earth at the head of an avenging army” (Hedges, 2006:4). This belief they interpret as evidence of “a theology of despair” because “for many the apocalypse can’t happen soon enough” (Hedges, 2006:186).

Explaining the popularity of the “New Christian Right”, these critics trace the origins of the evangelical involvement in politics to a few highly influential writers. One of the most commonly mentioned is the Presbyterian evangelist Francis A. Schaeffer whom Diamond describes as an early source of dominion theology. Specifically, they target his book *A christian manifesto* which, they point out, sold 290 000 copies in its first year and remained popular throughout the 1990s (Diamond, 1995:246). Alongside Schaeffer, Rushdoony, and his mentor the Calvinist theologian Cornelius Van Til are seen as creators of what all these writers see as a frighteningly anti-democratic movement (Diamond, 1995:247). They argue that the ideas of “Christian reconstructionism” are “being enacted through the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives” (Hedges 2006:13).

8. The political influence of Evangelical Christians in North America

To many secular readers the arguments of people like Diamond, Hedges and McDonald sound convincing. Fortunately for Christians their claims about christian politics do not stand up to scholarly analysis.

Probably the first scholarly work to use survey and other data to examine the political influence of evangelical Christians, particularly those associated with the Religious Right was written by Clyde Wilcox a Professor of Government at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. His book, *Onward Christian soldiers? The religious right in American politics*, is a well documented study packed with statistical and other data. Wilcox begins by telling his readers that although he “grew up in rural West Virginia” where “many of his

family and friends” were and are fundamentalist Christians, he “came of age politically in the late 1960s and was shaped by the civil rights, antiwar, feminist, and environmental movements. I strongly oppose most of the policy agenda of the Christian Right ...” (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:xi).

What follows is a detailed analysis of the social and political culture of evangelical Christianity which he carefully contrasts with the beliefs and attitudes of both mainline Christians and secular Americans. As a result, evangelical Christian involvement in American life is placed in a broad context where it is carefully studied.

Unlike McDonald, Hedges, or any of the other apocalyptic scaremongers, Wilcox shares Marsden’s view that the dominance of premillennialism among North American evangelical Christians “created a strong resistance to political involvement” (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:27) even though some writers, like Hal Lindsey, were later to mix “premillennialism with far-right, often paranoid politics” (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:35). Nevertheless, he observes, that by the 1990s “many Christian Right leaders” were “adopting a more postmillennialist theology” which was particularly popular among charismatic Christians (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:44).

Interestingly, although he identifies a drift towards postmillennial theology among American evangelicals, he pays very little attention to christian reconstruction, because he views it as “a tiny fringe of the Christian Right” (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:125). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that some Christian Right leaders, like Pat Robertson, have taken over some ideas from Rushdoony’s writings. Unlike the apocalyptic scaremongers, however, he does not see this as necessarily bad because research presents “a more complex picture” that shows that while many Americans are supportive of things like “prayer in school” they reject the more extreme views of reconstructionists (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:125).

Finally, Wilcox notes a generational shift among evangelicals that moves them towards more liberal social views and the centre of American society (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:146). Consequently, while he admits that there is always the remote possibility of a christian fascist takeover of America it seems highly unlikely, because most Christians, including leaders of the Christian Right, are thoroughly democratic in their thinking and aspirations (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:133-151). Therefore, he concludes that “Christian conservatives deserve a place in the political process” and that this involvement has “several positive aspects” because it will prevent the

alienation from society of a large number of Americans (Wilcox & Larson, 2006:150).

Some might wonder whether Wilcox's work is too dated to be of real value. Yet upon examination this seems not to be the case. What the available data shows is that as a group evangelical Christians tend to be far less politically active than any other segment of society and that when they get involved politically their commitments are quite diverse. For example Stark (2008:155) provides the following statistics for political activism:

Table 1: Statistics for political activism (Stark, 2008:155)

	Make a campaign contribution	Work in a campaign	Attend a meeting
Evangelicals	27%	6%	15%
Liberal Protestants	32%	11%	21%
No religion	37%	9%	25%
All non-Evangelicals	29%	10%	19%

Summarising his survey of political attitudes Stark finds no evidence that evangelical Christians play a disproportionate or extremist role in American political life (Stark, 2008:157-158).

Another recent survey of the political and social attitudes of conservative evangelical Christians by the highly respected sociologists Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout, reached similar conclusions. They wrote: "In our experience most of those who stereotype the Conservative Christians do not know any of them." Further, they suggest that attacks on evangelical Christians come from "not a few American secularists (who) think that any one with religious faith is mentally unbalanced ..." (Greeley & Hout, 2006:1983). Similar findings were reported by the Pew Research project, the *US Religious Landscape* (Pew Forums, 2008).

Despite such evidence it is still possible that right wing evangelical christian fascists secretly exercise profound influence over decision making in both Washington and Ottawa. Perhaps, as McDonald im-

plies, there is a subtle influence that lurks below the surface of public events.

Fortunately, Lindsay addresses this type of argument in his groundbreaking study, *Faith in the halls of power* (Lindsay, 2007). Although he acknowledges that “the evangelical movement ... now wields power in just about every segment of American life ...” (Lindsay, 2007:208), he refutes the idea that there is some plot or “master plan” for christian dominance by pointing out that the growth of evangelicals in American life simply reflects the demographics of American society (Lindsay, 2007:218).

Further, he argues that “evangelicals have been active in both parties ...” (Lindsay, 2007:208), and contrary to the view that evangelicals are intolerant, clearly states that “American evangelicalism has the ability to maintain a core set of convictions without being so rigid that it cannot cooperate with others who do not share them” (Lindsay, 2007:216). Most importantly Lindsay points out that “many of the (evangelical) leaders I spoke to tried to distance themselves from” the *Left Behind* series and similar books, describing such works as “evangelical kitsch” (Lindsay, 2007:219). As a result he finds no evidence for the type of scare mongering the critics discussed in this paper promote.

While it is always possible that the White House is actually run by little green men from Mars, proving it is another matter. Of course if anyone wants to maintain such an absurd belief they can always claim that while on earth these advanced aliens are invisible and rule politicians by telepathic means that are entirely undetectable. Against such arguments nothing can be said, except “rubbish”.

9. Conclusion

Looking at the issue of Faith Based Initiatives in the light of the evidence, rather than representing some deep change in American religious values as critics suggest, the endorsement of Faith Based programs by Afro-Americans, Hispanics, Jewish, and Muslim groups is more likely to reflect an underlying social change that has transformed American society over the past 30 years. This change is the shift from rampant individualism to the growth of group values usually seen in terms of multiculturalism.

An examination of the opponents of Faith Based Initiatives shows that they include American atheists, Libertarians, southern Baptists, and a host of similar groups that are committed to Lockean Indivi-

dualism. On the other side of the equation are various community based groups and individuals like John Ashcroft, Pat Robertson, and Joseph Liebermann whose political identity is deeply rooted in specific communities that benefit from state assistance. Thus rather than leading to divisiveness being religious is communal.

America is changing and Faith Based Initiatives are a symptom of that change, but the change itself is far deeper and more profound than a power grab by a small group of conservative Christians. Rather it signifies a major change in the way Americans of different ethnic background no longer see themselves as American blacks, American Jews or American Hispanics but rather as black, Jewish, Hispanic, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, and pentecostal Americans. For the first time since the American Revolution ethnicity and religious identity are beginning to trump birth and citizenship as the prime factor in the way people living in the United State define their identity.

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Key concepts:

Christianity and politics

conflict of worldviews

ethnicity and religion

Faith Based Initiatives

Kernbegrippe:

Christendom en politiek

etnisiteit en godsdienst

Geloofsgebaseerde Inisiatiewe

konflik van wêreldbeskouings

2 This site has been permanently archived and is now found at: <http://whitehouse.georgewbush.org/index.asp>