

Commentary

The Problem With Faith-Based Funding Is Faith Itself

By BART KOSKO

Religious conservatives can't have it both ways. They can't spend tax money to support faith and at the same time say it is wrong to criticize faith. Money always comes with strings attached.

This goes beyond putting religious slogans on money and outlawing first-class mail on Sunday. And it goes beyond the problems of the "establishment" clause of the 1st Amendment and extending the heavy hand of government to private charities. It goes to a rule of fair play: You get to criticize something if your taxes pay for it.

That rule applies now since President Bush has called for more tax dollars for "faith-based" organizations and has appointed a faith czar—social scientist John DiIulio—to oversee this new and unprecedented church-state effort.

Nor does an open door to "all faiths" bar criticism. That only shifts criticism to the concept of faith itself. And there are at least three reasons to criticize faith of any species.

• *Faith is unwarranted belief.* Faith is belief without evidence or despite evidence to the contrary. Faith occurs when a person believes that something is true even though he suspects it is false. It takes large doses of such faith to support the very existence of casinos, psychic hotlines,

astrology columns, mall Santas and most organized religions.

Perhaps the mother of all faith is belief in some form of life after death. A recent Time/CNN poll found that 81% of Americans believe in an eternal afterlife. But science has found no more evidence for an afterlife than it has found for Santa's workshop at the North Pole. The almost universal faith in an afterlife seems to be nothing more than group denial of death.

The faithful often reply that scientists engage in faith and that science itself is a religion. Scientists do engage in faith for a moment when they guess at a new claim of mathematics or when they put forth a new factual claim about the world. But the guesses and claims are provisional. Logic or facts can knock them down, and they usually do. Religious faith is belief despite such logic or facts. A case in point is Faith Czar DiIulio's faith in his own program: "There are, as yet, no suitably scientific studies that 'prove' the efficacy or cost-effectiveness of faith-based approaches to social ills."

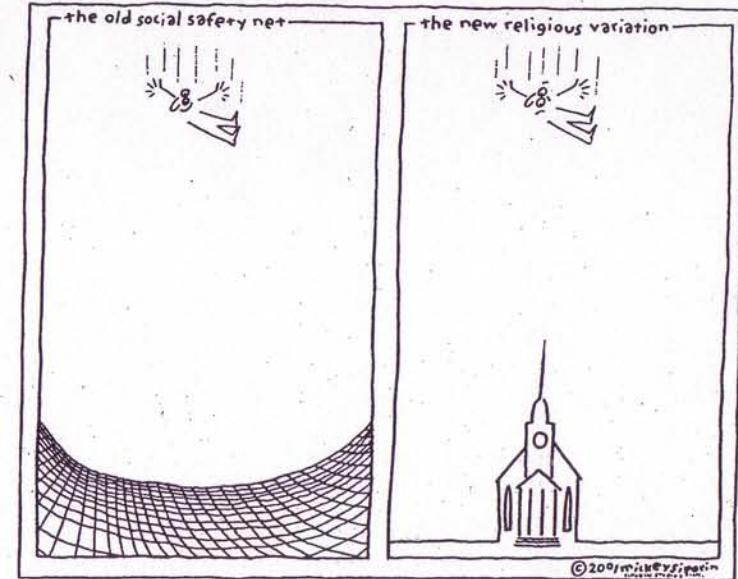
• *Faith often gets it wrong.* Faith has costs even though it seems to be an intellectual free lunch. Consider our faith in beating the odds. The National Council on Problem Gambling found that in 1997 Americans lost more than \$50 billion on lotteries and other forms of legalized gambling. That was more money than they spent on all movies and music and sporting events combined, and they did this despite the published odds that all such bets

would lose on average. Hence Las Vegas will likely remain this country's top tourist destination. Faith is even more dangerous when it dictates morality. The faithful have all too often been willing to die or kill for their notions of spiritual right and wrong. The record here is bloody and ranges from the ancient state-run religions of Egypt and Babylon to the current violence between Muslims and Christians in Kosovo. Most of the 30 or so armed conflicts in the world stem from faith-based disputes.

Then there is John Ashcroft, the new attorney general. He admitted the strength of his faith in a 1999 interview in the Pentecostal magazine *Charisma*: "It's said that we shouldn't legislate morality. Well, I disagree. I think all we should legislate is morality." And Ashcroft made clear in a 1999 speech at Bob Jones University that his faith trumps all else: "America has been different. We have no king but Jesus." But what if non-Christians don't want Jesus as their "king?"

• *Faith undermines critical thinking.* The whole point of critical thinking is to root out error and unwarranted belief. Do we want jurors to use faith to reach a verdict? Do we want citizens to use "faith-based reasoning" when they weigh the claims of politicians or advertisers or anyone else who tries to sell them something? Don't the claims of racists, cultists and dictators rest on faith and not on evidence or reason?

And faith is no friend in the classroom.



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The goal of learning is to teach students to think critically for themselves. A good teacher does not want students to take what he says on faith. Students should question the grounds for what he says. They need to learn how to derive conclusions from assumptions and how to judge the accuracy of an argument's assumptions. The rules of logic and evidence apply just as well to the study of Greek mythology and comparative politics as they do to the study of atoms and genes. No one gets an A for saying, "It's true because

I believe it's true." Yet that is just the admission ticket to faith-based belief schemes from astrology to most organized religions.

Most Americans are saturated with faith. Tax subsidies would only encourage more of it. What we need is more critical thinking. We need more doubt.

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