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Yes, Faith-Based Hiring with Tax Dollars

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 16, 2009 NCR Today

My colleague Maureen Fiedler is correct [1] when she notes that the issue confronting President Obama is whether or not faith-based organizations should be able to discriminate in hiring based on religion with moneys received from the federal government. Otherwise, why would be discussing the matter? And, she raises the issue of such monies being used to proselytize but that is a separate issue.

Proselytizing should not be permitted in social service agencies run by the Church. On the other hand, recall President Obama?s speech at Notre Dame when he spoke about how moved he had been by the witness and the word of Chicago?s Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. The President saw a man who lived his humanity differently because of his encounter with Christ. Was that proselytizing? The courts will doubtless have to draw lines here about what is and is not permissible and I suppose they won?t get much more accurate than Justice Potter Stewart?s definition of pornography: ?I know it when I see it.?

Nor should government funds be used for agencies that only assist members of a given religion. A drug therapy center needs to help anyone who comes to its doors. If that drug therapy center is a Catholic institution, it can sustain its Catholic identity no matter who it helps. Someone once asked Cardinal James Hickey why the Archdiocese of Washington was spending so much money on inner city schools that helped mostly poor, non-Catholic children, and he replied, ?We don?t help the poor because they are Catholic. We help them because we are Catholic.?

?Because we are Catholic.? I do not know how you maintain that sense of Catholic mission, of Catholic identity, if your entire staff is made up of non-Catholics. Unlike the issue of proselytizing, the government has an interest in social services being provided to our society?s needy. If the government chooses to give funds to a Catholic organization because of the services it provides, that does not mean the government should be entitled to tell us whom we can hire. Only those who are excessively concerned about a ?wall of separation? would see this as a breach of the First Amendment.

The issue is mirky, I admit. Either the government will discriminate against religious organizations by denying funding or those organizations will, over time, cease to be meaningfully religious. What is hard to admit is the idea that jobs like counseling or working in a soup kitchen are, as Fielder writes, ?neutral ? religiously speaking.? I think one of the central points of Pope Benedict?s magnificent encycylical Caritas in Veritate was to point out the way our concern for others is integral to our faith. We are compelled to help the poor by reason of our faith. A Catholic social service provider may be efficient, it may be effective, it may alleviate suffering and do a lot of good, but unless its work springs from a shared faith commitment, it is not meaningfully Catholic.

The government can help us or not with its moneys, but it is hard to see how refusing funds to a Catholic social service provider because it is Catholic is not also a violation of the First Amendment. Putting the adjective ?Catholic? in the title of the organization does not guarantee its Catholicity. Check out ?Catholics for Choice.? Our ministries to the poor and the needy in our society are not just an exercise in do-gooderism. They are prayerful continuations of the healing ministry of Jesus.

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