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## You Better Believe Federal Faith-Based Funding Is a Bad Idea

By Karen McCarthy Brown, Karen McCarthy Brown is director of the Newark Project, a mapping of religious life in Newark, N.J., and professor of anthropology of religion at Drew University Graduate and Theological Schools.

Lots of people seem to think that federal funding for faith-based charity violates the separation of church and state. It does.

But there is another reason why Americans should be wary of allowing the government to have any financial control over our richly diverse religious traditions: Such funding allows the government to decide, essentially, what counts as a religion.

President Bush's recent executive orders facilitating the flow of federal money to religion-based charities empower the government to dictate which cultures will be central to our society and which will be relegated to the social margins.

For Bush, there is no confusion. "If a charity is helping the needy," he said, "it should not matter if there is a rabbi on the board or a cross or a crescent on the wall."

So the president acknowledges Judaism, Christianity and Islam, thus joining a new elitist consensus on the nature of religious pluralism.

This consensus reduces the plethora of religious traditions being practiced in the nation to a meager three.

How many people in the U.S. follow religious beliefs other than those held by the "Big Three"?

There are no precise numbers; it is difficult to say who "belongs" to any religion that does not follow the congregational model.

And estimates differ widely on many religions. For example, Harvard University's Pluralism Project estimates that there are 2.45 million to 4 million Buddhists in the U.S.

Yet too much attention to the wide diversity among religions in this country would challenge long-standing Protestant hegemony, including Bush's conservative version of it.

So it is safe to assume that African-based religions such as Santeria, Palo Monte, Vodou, Macumba, Candomble and Rastafarianism will not receive one penny of Bush's faith-based initiative money, even though hundreds of thousands of African Americans and Caribbean immigrants in major cities throughout the country follow these traditions.

Hmong shamans won't get any federal money either; Cambodian and Korean shamans would probably be written off as superstitious should they try to apply.

I suppose some segments of the Buddhist community could eventually qualify, but the only ones that would succeed would be those that have Americanized their religious practices so that they look like a church with a countable congregation. I doubt that even the most esteemed Zen roshi in the country could qualify for federal funding.

Even though Mexicans make up the largest of the new immigrant groups, the application process alone would effectively eliminate indigenous religions from Mexico. Storefront operations need not apply.

The wave of immigration occasioned by new laws in the 1960s brought new groups of people to the United States from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as several places in Asia. They tend to be people of color, and most are poor.

Among them are many whose faith-based charity will sustain their families, friends and neighbors but will never be enhanced by federal money.

Bush has claimed that his government will respect the work of "every faith-based group in America," but so many would be unrecognizable as religious to him that it is difficult to know what this promised respect is worth.

It begins to look as if the faith-based initiative program is just another way to ignore the poor and keep people of color in line.