

On Faith Based Initiatives

As a secular humanist I do not believe that faith based charities should receive public funds. If the program is established, however, as it apparently is by the President, then I think that members of the organized secular and humanist groups should be involved in the community projects and/or their boards, and for two reasons. First it is essential that such charities provide services that are effective and that they be tested by the best methods of science. For example, if there is a program to help people afflicted with alcoholic addiction, then we need the best empirical evaluation of the therapy offered. This needs to be objectively appraised independently of whether the sponsorship is a religious body or not. Another illustration concerns our medical schools. If a medical school is affiliated with a denominational university, then clearly it is the quality of the educational program this is the criterion of support. Second, independent secularists need to sit on the boards of such community bodies to see that there is no violation of the separation of church and state, and that the advocacy of a religious faith is not surreptitiously infused with the service. In terms of the First Amendment, the funds provided by the government should not support the faith aspect of the charity. As members of a community we should work cooperative with all sectors of society to see that needed charitable services are well-provided.

An illustration of this is the fact that I was invited by the Presidents Commission for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine to give testimony of the efficacy of such therapies. Members of the Commission were drawn primarily from those who were sympathetic to Alternative Medicine. There were acupuncturists, message therapists, crystal therapists and others present. I presented a skeptical evaluation of their claims and called for double blind random testing, which I thought was all too often ignored. Some members of the Commission and many in the audience said that they appreciated my contributions. Similarly for faith based charities.