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July 3, 2008: Having it Both Ways on Faith-Based Providers

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Title: Having it Both Ways on Faith-Based Providers

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7/3/2008--Senator Barack Obama is trying to have it both ways on the issue of granting public money to religiously-affiliated non-profit organizations that are providing services to those in need. The likely Democratic nominee for President, whom I support by the way, says that such groups should be eligible for public funds. This helps him appeal to religious voters. But then Obama says, inconsistently, that these religious groups should not be permitted to discriminate on the basis of religion in hiring their own staff. No one doubts that if you receive public money to provide services, you can neither discriminate in choice of clients nor proselytize. These were both requirements under President Bush's original faith-based initiative. But, having conceded that religious groups should be eligible to receive public funds, how can their desire to provide services as a religious organization be questioned? The reason that a religious group provides needed services is not, after all, just to provide the services. Presumably the reason they do so is that this service to others is witnessing to God's love. How can a Christian organization, for example, witness to God's love through Christ unless the organization is Christian? Not only is Obama's position incoherent, it is not clear what the government's interest is in requiring religiously-neutral hiring in this context. If the point of the program is to provide services to those who need them, then as long as there is no discrimination in the choice of clients, that need is fulfilled. If the point is to ensure that there is no discrimination in the public services job market, then why only require religious groups who receive public money to hire neutrally? Why not require this of all religious groups that provide services to the needy regardless of whether they receive public funds or not? Everyone can see that such a requirement would be an intolerable interference with such groups' religious rights. How does the receipt of public funds change that? As readers of this blog know, this is not the first time Senator Obama has tried to have it both ways on religion. He says he is open to the language of faith in the public square but then reverses that by saying that believers should translate religious language into language accessible to all. Senator Obama is going to learn that religion is an area requiring clear principles. It is not a place for splitting the difference.