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June 17, 2010: Do Christian Groups Have the Right to Hire Only Christians?

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Title: Do Christian Groups Have the Right to Hire Only Christians?

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6/17/2010—Bobby Ross has written a story for Christianity Today reporting the escalating issue of religious discrimination in hiring by faith-based organizations (Faith-Based Fracas). The story reports that World Vision is being sued by three former employees who, though apparently self-confessed Christians, were fired because do not believe that Jesus Christ is fully God. It is just the sort of story that drives secularists crazy. World Vision receives taxpayer funds for various services it performs. Candidate Barack Obama seemed to say that such organizations should have to follow federal anti-discrimination laws. The legal situation at the moment seems to be that the Constitution would allow the government to force religious service providers to hire in a non-discriminatory fashion, but that the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 contains a statutory exception for religious service providers. Even though non-discrimination seems obvious to the non-religious, I tried to explain in my new book why that might not be appropriate. Religiously provided services in all social welfare fields is a matter of religious witness to the truth of that particular religion's message. So, for example, a Christian group that helps addicts recover from addiction is testifying to the power of Christ to change lives. And something similar would be the case with service providers in other religious traditions. The foundation of religious witness explains why the faith-based provider might insist--I don't know whether they all insist, but some do--that the entire organization must consist of Christians. A non-Christian may of course be competent at providing social services, but, by definition, a non-Christian cannot witness to the power of Christ. In fact, participation by non-Christians in the faith-based group would tend to undermine the claim of Christian witness because then it might be said that anyone, and not just Christians, might behave the same way with the same power for good. Rather than think of the matter as discrimination at all, it would be better to think of this hiring practice as similar to the need of the organization to identify itself as Christian. Just as there would be no point in the program if no one knew that it was Christ's representatives who were providing the service, the group could also not self-identify if it were not composed exclusively of Christians. Since even with the receipt of public funds, faith-based providers are permitted to identify passively as Christian, it ought to follow that even with the receipt of public funds, such groups may restrict hiring to Christians as well.