



Welcome to Faith-Based America

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Posted on October 22, 2005, Printed on October 24, 2005

<http://www.alternet.org/story/27122/>

What's wrong with this picture?

As part of President Bush's "faith-based initiative," US taxpayers gave the Salvation Army's children services division \$47 million this year -- 95% of its total budget. Several Salvation Army employees refused to take the Salvation Army's pledge "proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord," reveal which church they belong to or identify gay co-workers -- and were summarily fired.

Let's parse this event out. The money came from American taxpayers, many of whom are not Christians. Nevertheless the workers were fired for refusing to pledge allegiance to the Christian prophet. They were also fired for failing to disclose their own religious affiliations, if any. And finally, they were fired for refusing to rat out their co-workers.

Sounds like something that would happen in Communist China, doesn't it? And, if it had happened in China, and it was Christians getting fired, you can bet your sweet bippy the Bush administration and America's Christian right would be screaming bloody murder about it.

But not this time. They even found a judge to back them on it.

Bush's big victory came Sept. 30 in New York, where a federal judge threw out most elements of a religious discrimination lawsuit against the Salvation Army. Eighteen employees claimed they were fired or demoted because they refused to pledge support to the Salvation Army's mission of "proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord," disclose what church they attended or name gay co-workers.

U.S. District Judge Sidney H. Stein noted that all the plaintiffs worked for a children's services division of the Salvation Army that gets 95 percent of its \$50 million budget from government grants. But the judge's 48-page opinion upheld the principle that a religious group can hire and fire employees on the basis of their religious beliefs and practices, even if their salaries come from taxpayer funds. That principle is at the heart of the Bush administration's policy. ([Full Story](#))

Since the federal money the Salvation Army received represents nearly 100% of that division's total budget, it's a de facto federally funded program. So, are these the new HR rules for faith-based federally funded programs? Rat out gays on the payroll, or be fired. Pledge allegiance to the favored religion or superstition de jour, or be fired. Answer the question, "Are you now, or have you ever been, an atheist?" or be fired.

Why not just streamline hiring at federally funded faith-based organizations by requiring that everyone's religious affiliation be tattooed on their arms? Worked for the Germans.

Meanwhile in the American theocratic state of Utah, the ACLU has locked horns with the Mormon Church over freedom of speech and dress in a Salt Lake City downtown park. A federal appeals court Monday validated Salt Lake City's controversial sale of its Main Street Plaza park to the LDS Church, which promptly turned the former section of historic Main Street into a LDS religious park.

Three judges on the Denver-based 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled the plaza is private property and that the city didn't endorse the LDS Church by selling off the right to public access. "Looked at objectively, the ... case is one of neutrality and equal access, in which the city does nothing to advance religion, but merely enables the LDS Church to advance itself," wrote the court.

The ruling is a victory for the city and the LDS Church, which joined to fight the American Civil Liberties Union and four plaintiffs. The ACLU wanted the court to declare the plaza a public sidewalk and allow free speech there -- though such a ruling could have led the church to wall off the plaza. Practically, the decision changes nothing since the LDS Church has been controlling the property since 2003, when the City Council voted to eliminate the easement in an emotionally charged land swap. The church manages it like its other religious property -- visitors are welcome but cannot engage in behavior the church finds offensive. [\(Full Story\)](#)

Lee Siegel, one of the ACLU's plaintiffs, called the decision a sad day for the principal of separation of church and state saying, it "adds to the feeling that I live in a state run by the American Taliban. Salt Lake City and the church have successfully weaseled themselves to a victory, but it doesn't make it right." He said, "I hope they enjoy their lily white, golly gee, clean, fun plaza."

When the plaza was sold to the church a few years back, the Mormons pitched the deal to the City saying they wanted to turn it into "a little bit of Paris" and to enhance downtown pedestrian access.

Of course no one thought for a second they meant can-can dancers and topless sunbathing. Actually what they meant was, no T-shirts or signs with messages they did not like, no speakers saying unkind things about Mormons. The LDS Church now decides what kind of speech will and will not be allowed in the park. And, even though it's outdoors, there will be no smoking or "disorderly" speech, dress or conduct. And other Christians beware: proselytizing is forbidden -- unless by approved members of the LDS Church.

All this from a church founded by a guy, Joseph Smith, who, if he lived today would be fitted for a straitjacket and put on a mega-dose of anti-psychotic drugs.

Let's pretend. What if somehow the Nation of Islam were able to convince the City

of Washington to sell them Lafayette Park across from the White House. And they tried to pull an anti-American stunt like the Mormons have pulled off in Salt Lake City. How long do you think it would be before the reverends Dobson, Falwell and their ilk started screaming bloody murder on CNN?

I'm going to start compiling a list of acquaintances I suspect are gay. Who knows, I may need a federal job someday and a list like that could come in mighty handy.

Stephen Pizzo is the author of numerous books, including "Inside Job: The Looting of America's Savings and Loans," which was nominated for a Pulitzer.

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